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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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THE SHIP OF HORROR

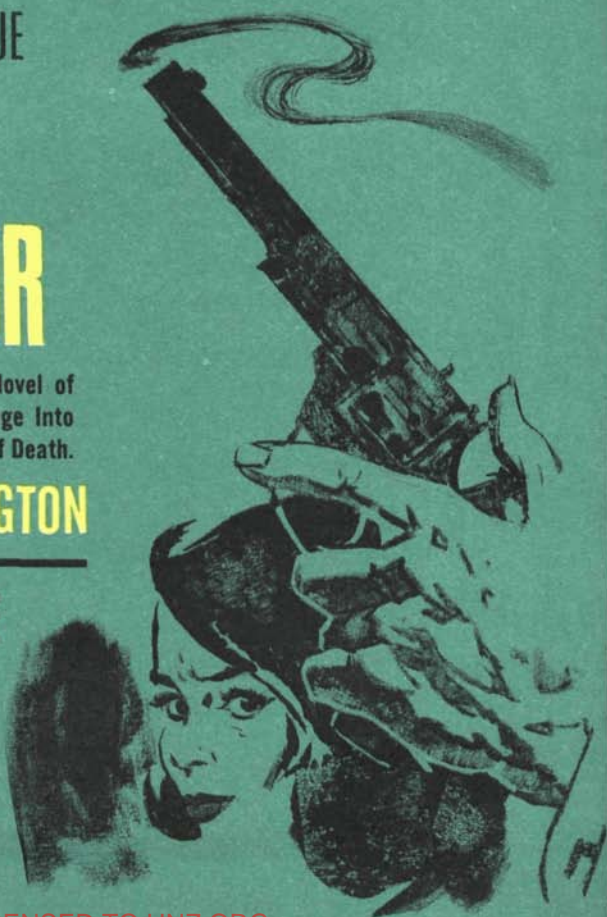
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a Pest Ship's Uncharted Voyage Into
Unknown Seas Bearing a Cargo of Death.

by **HARRY WHITTINGTON**

DEATH TIMES THREE

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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



FEBRUARY, 1968

VOL. 22, NO. 3

NEW COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

THE SHIP OF HORROR

by HARRY WHITTINGTON

Her cargo Murder, hell her home port, the doomed tramp ship sailed on her uncharted voyage into unknown seas—where Death was the helmsman and no man came back alive!

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The Ship of Horror

She was a pest ship, bearing a cargo of death, as she sailed on her uncharted voyage into unknown seas—where no man came back alive!

by HARRY WHITTINGTON



EDDIE SAWYER gazed at the blonde sharing his booth and frowned. He watched her closely. "You're trying *not* to tell me something, Candy."

She bit her lip. "No. I'm trying to tell you something."

He exhaled heavily. It had begun as a night unlike all others when Candace called asking him for a date. Ice-blue gown and sable-soft evening cape enhanced her ash-blond loveliness and sultry blue eyes.

Wary, testing her rapport-potential, Eddie Sawyer chose Charlie's—the famous Greenwich Village

oddball discotheque eat-sing-and-entertain-yourself bistro.

"For laughs," he'd said. Only Candace hadn't been amused.

He caught glimpses of her displeasure along with a green-flecked reflection of himself in her eyes. In dinner jacket and black tie, he might have been accountant or lawyer, with easy smile, brown eyes warmly alive, though they'd witnessed fierce conflicts and sudden deaths in hot areas of the earth.

"Taking me slumming so we won't be seen by anyone you know, Eddie?" Candace sounded mildly chilled.

A CHILLINGLY TAUT COMPLETE NOVEL



"I imagined a public health doctor's idea of dating me would be slumming." He gave her a crooked smile. "I wanted you to feel at ease."

She drew a deep breath and he saw how upset she was. "Sorry. It's my mood. I'm ready to burst in helpless frustration."

"Is that why you suddenly called asking *me* for a date, when you always insisted your career came first, or you were too busy?"

She smiled. "My finest compliment to you. I date only people who won't disrupt my schedule or my career."

"Still, you always managed to make me feel like a Dale Carnegie drop-out."

"Forgive me, Eddie. I could like you, intensely and—"

"This is bad?"

"For me. I know what I want and you've never taken me or my career seriously."

"You're wrong. Maybe I had difficulty reconciling the fact a girl with the unlikely name of Candy Mountain—"

"Candace!"

"—would also be a physician."

"What should I have been? A model?"

He smiled. "You're in great shape for it."

Dr. Mountain spoke to the backs of her hands. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should have been a model. No one believes I am a doctor, and if I am, they won't believe I

know anything! Not even other doctors, or even the people who hired me."

"Take it easy, Doctor—" Eddie Sawyer began.

"I can't." Candace shook her head. "I called you because I need help desperately. It's like a nightmare that gets worse, and I've got to talk about it or die."

Whatever she had been about to add was abruptly driven from her mind. A man angled between the tables of bearded beatniks, the jean-clad, ironed-haired dolls, the greasy candles. Catching sight of him, Candace stopped talking. Her mouth parted in astonishment.

At the first whispered *chunk, chunk, chunk* of the silenced gun from across the room, Sawyer reacted instinctively before anyone else decoded its lethal threat.

He thrust the table outward from his booth, dragged Candace to the floor behind it, and freed his .38 from its shoulder holster in one fluid motion.

His gaze swept the room. A flicker of insubstantial shadow and the assailant fled up the steps, past the hat-check booth, toward the exit.

The man approaching their table was toppled over it. Sawyer didn't need to touch him to know he was dead. The room reverberated with screams of panic.

A second bullet ripped a jagged hole in the leather booth where he and Candy had sat. Candy slumped

against him. He spoke her name but she didn't answer.

Watching the exit, Sawyer lifted her to the leather booth-seat. She didn't move. He hesitated, scowling. Two waiters hovered over them.

"Get a doctor for her!" Sawyer ordered.

Sawyer pushed his way between the two waiters, and ran. Villagers, suddenly stricken into clay by terror, blocked his way. Bearded men, like wide-eyed owls, hooted, "Who? Who?"

A small derelict, completely bald except for temple fringe that luxuriated into scraggly beard, caught Eddie Sawyer's arm. "Man! Like what gives, man?"

Sawyer wrenched free. The little man stared after him mournfully. "There's a cat growing his very own ulcer, man!"

On the walk above Charlie's, Sawyer paused. The very immensity of the city almost overwhelmed him. How to find one man in ten million?

The avenue was deserted almost as far as the garish glare of 14th Street. South, the area was darker and Sawyer gambled. He turned south toward the park. Striding as close to the shadow-scalloped buildings as stoops and enclosed basement entrances permitted, he moved warily, his eyes probing the gloom.

The abrupt slamming of a car door at the curb behind him struck



like a fist in his kidney, because he'd checked every car as he passed, and they'd all appeared empty. He stiffened, heeling around.

"You," Sawyer said. "Just a minute! Did you see—"

The man reacted to the sound of Eddie's voice by sprinting at an angle across the avenue toward a darkened building and a narrow alley beyond it. The New Yorker's inbred code of disengagement, or fear, could have caused him to break into a trot.

It didn't make sense. The man had gotten out of a late model Olds, yet in the darkness he had the appearance of a bum in shape-

less felt hat and dark, ill-fitting jacket.

As if tuned to Eddie's thought processes, the bum bolted up on the curb, bowling over a garbage can.

Eddie Sawyer followed, gaining rapidly. The man glanced over his shoulder, his face deeply shadowed by the turned-down hat brim.

He stared at Sawyer's gaining on him for the space of a breath, then broke into a run toward the park at the far end of the block. The streets and avenues around them rattled with the outraged wails of sirens, police and ambulance.

Still in the street, Eddie angled in to cut him off. The man stopped abruptly, looked about and lunged into the alley.

"I just want to talk to you!" Eddie said. His swinging arm knocked off the man's felt hat. The man gasped, breathing in gulping wheezes, but he kept moving into the labyrinth of darkness.

Sawyer's clutching fingers grasped the collar of the man's jacket. It peeled loose in his hands as if he'd skinned a rabbit. Simultaneously, lights like a dozen flash bulbs flared inches from his face, temporarily blinding him. Sawyer lurched to the left, reacting instinctively in an attempt to escape the direct burst of the bulbs. His shoulder crashed into the wall.

He hit the ground on his knees. A silenced bullet smashed its nose against bricks inches above his

head. Crouching, Sawyer closed his eyes, squeezing them shut in an effort to regain partial vision. But even with his eyes closed, he recoiled from the display of rockets, roman candles and fire devils bursting in every hue of red and green.

This time the whispered bullet sound was farther away. Sawyer crouched, hearing the man running away along the passage. The assailant! He'd had his hands on the neck of the man with the silenced gun—and lost him.

Sawyer pressed deeper into the shadows, rendered helpless by light-blindness. The fleeing man was too far away to hope for any accuracy with a silencer on his weapon. But he accomplished one thing, he kept Eddie Sawyer immobilized until he lost himself in the shadows.

Inventing new uncomplimentary names for himself, Eddie Sawyer stood up at last, able to distinguish vague forms, all firestruck. He shoved his gun into its holster. He searched until he found the wool jacket, the felt hat.

The area around Charlie's was alive with police when he got back there. After a brief argument, he was admitted to the cafe, where police had seated all patrons unfortunate enough to be on the premises.

Eddie stepped into the room, paused. He stared at the booth where he'd sat with Candy. The

table had been replaced, but the booth was empty.

"Where's the young woman?" Sawyer asked the man nearest him.

"I'm Lieutenant Rico Amalfitano," the plainclothes officer said. "What you got there," Amalfitano wasn't a big man, but his shoulders were beefy, his dark hair clipped short. He nodded toward the hat and jacket.

Sawyer handed them over. "I got them off the man who shot at me. Where is—"

"Did he get away?"

"Yes. Where is—"

"Did you get a look at him?"

"No. Just these things. The young woman—where—"

"We'll run a check on them." Amalfitano shrugged. "The lady you were with was shot, mister."

II

PROWLING the corridor in General Hospital, Eddie Sawyer stared at his clenched fists. He'd been too intimately entangled with sudden death to allow what had happened to Candy to unnerve him.

He walked to the swinging doors marked *Surgery Area—Authorized Personnel Only*, as if by some miracle he could see through them.

He was aware of the duty nurses watching him covertly. He turned from the door, began the taut trek along the antiseptic-smelling corridor. He felt guilty about Candy's being hurt. He'd met her at a party

a few months ago. She'd intrigued him.

He drew the back of his hand across his mouth. Maybe he was a jinx. Love was always a matter of double-parking for him—a quick kiss and a ticket for resisting arrest. He'd never had any real luck with women—this wasn't the first girl who'd stopped a bullet because she dared come too near him.

The surgery doors parted and a young doctor in sweated green cap, green cotton suit spotted with blood, came toward him. His eyes grayed-out with weariness, the young surgeon extended his hand. "I'm Dr. Reese Ames, resident. You a relative of Miss Mountain?"

"How is she?"

"No reason to be alarmed. She suffered a superficial shoulder wound. The bullet grazed her clavicle, causing a hairline fracture. There was a great deal of blood. No real damage."

"How long before I can see her?"

"You shouldn't see her before tomorrow afternoon. Does she have a family here in New York?"

"If I could just talk to her for a moment—"

"I'm afraid not." Dr. Ames stopped smiling, and the warmth drained out of his thin face. He wiped sweat from his forehead with the wadded green cap and for one more moment he and Sawyer stood, their gazes locked, unrelenting.

It was Eddie Sawyer who reluctantly gave way.

Twenty three minutes later he stepped from the taxi outside the soot-and-dust smeared station house of Police Precinct 33. He paused for a moment on the curb, watching the cab pull away in the darkness. He glanced up at the light over the precinct entrance, thinking about Candy.

"Boss!"

Eddie jerked his mind back to this moment and the reality of the night street. He turned, recognizing the tan Porsche resting in a tow-away zone.

He watched Peter Drake thrust open the curb-side door and step out, as if unaware he was breaking a law in front of a police station.

Drake crossed the walk toward him in brightly colored pajama tops, contrasting slacks, hand-woven slippers without socks. His hair was pillow-mussed. He not only hadn't combed it, he hadn't bothered running his fingers through its auburn tangle.

"No sense your losing sleep over this," Eddie said.

But he was inwardly pleased to have his slender partner at his side. Off-duty, Drake lived alone and tried, not too successfully, to like it. A loner, he was a clever man with a computer-like mind. Sometimes he seemed to operate like a programmed-machine, without heart. Eddie had learned long ago that Pete Drake cared deeply about

things and people close to him, so deeply that perhaps this explained why he couldn't even talk about it.

Sawyer lit a cigarette, looked at his slender companion. "We're in a funny racket. 'You've said many times we were just nuts to sign up with—"

He stopped. It was a funny thing. The entire time he and Peter Drake had been on their assignment, he had never mentioned the name of the organization which paid them.

Come to think of it, it had no name, Just a man. John Reed—Department X.

It was enough, somehow.

Peter Drake grinned. He looked very young, almost jaunty. "It's a puzzlement," he said. "Me, a third rate private-eye, starving on no-pay divorce traps. You, a bigshot police lieutenant, booted out of the force on a trumped up political frameup. Then we meet a guy named John Reed and the world changes overnight."

Sawyer shrugged. "I was ready to cash in," he said simply. "Life had lost all meaning. I drank all the booze in Moriarty's. And then, one night, getting over the shakes and waiting for the next handout, I met—John Reed."

Peter Drake nodded. "The little guy is something. He looks like a bookkeeper and talks like a schoolteacher. But when you get past that dry, rasping voice of his and listen to what he's saying—"

Eddie Sawyer looked out across the street. He knew. They didn't have to say it. When the man named John Reed talked, things got different, somehow. It wasn't a private eye job any longer. It was sort of a holy mission, bigger than any individual, more important than any one man's life. When you worked for John Reed, you were working for the world. And you'd come through with your assignment, somehow, or die trying.

Many men before him had done that very thing. Many would after him.

Sawyer shivered, although the night was warm.

Pete Drake said, "Reed's tape reported a shooting. Said you nearly got clipped. Only part I didn't believe was it said it happened at Charlie's—in Greenwich Village."

Eddie Sawyer nodded.

Peter Drake shook his head as if despairing of solving life's minor mysteries. "Picked up the signal on our short-wave band in the middle of a Dizzy Gillespie concert. I thought I was dreaming."

"You were awake, all right. They missed me. Got the girl with me—"

Lieutenant Rico Amalfitano came out in to the corridor to meet them. He said, "Thanks for coming down. I came right back here," and let them into his office.

Amalfitano went around his cluttered desk and sat down in a swivel chair that whined in dry pro-



test. He said, concentrating on the papers stacked before him, "Anything you can tell us about this shooting, Sawyer? Did you get a look at the killer?"

"No. As I said, it happened fast. Whoever it was knew we were there, knew what he wanted. Maybe the identity of the dead man will give us some clue, unless he was an innocent bystander."

"You any reason to believe he was more than that?"

"Yes. I believe Miss Mountain knew him."

Amalfitano hesitated a moment, then picked up a morgue report from his desk, studied it. "His name was Roy Gravewright. That mean anything to you?"

"No. Perhaps it will to Miss Mountain.

"We'll check on that."

"Anything on the hat and coat?" Sawyer asked.

Amalfitano shrugged. "Traced them to a rummage store on fourteenth Street. That's it."

"What else can you tell us about the dead man?"

"Roy Gravewright? Not much to tell. He was forty-three. A medical school lab technician. A widower, lived alone. Didn't go out much, had few friends. Nothing on him politically. He puttered around, a part-time inventor."

Amalfitano, watching them across his desk, stood up. He said, "One last thing before you go, Sawyer. We asked you at the time of the shooting. Now I'm asking you again. Any reason anyone should shoot at you?"

Eddie's face grew impassive, and a mask, barely discernible went over his eyes.

There were a lot of reasons, yes. Many people, any day, any night would like to kill Eddie Sawyer and Peter Drake. He had lived with sudden death so long that he was almost, but not quite used to it.

Come to think of it, he'd been on the death list for three years now. Ever since the big India Oil, Limited, stock scandal. But that was none of a certain policeman's business. Later, perhaps, but certainly not now.

Eddie Sawyer shrugged. "I don't

know. I use everything they advise on TV—"

Amalfitano frowned. "What about the young woman?"

"Dr. Mountain? What about her?"

"Any reason she'd set you up down there—to get you shot at?"

"She's the one who got shot."

"You moved pretty fast when the shooting started."

"I'm allergic to lead, Lieutenant."

Amalfitano gazed across his desk. "Know why anyone would be shooting at the young woman?"

"I don't know, but—"

"Never mind saying it, Sawyer. We'll ask her."

III

THE NIGHT DUTY receptionist pinned identification tags on Sawyer's jacket lapel, and on Drake's pajama pocket. These plastic disks could be read by the electric eyes that would scan them as they strode through the gleaming glass, chrome and stone corridors inside the office marked Dept X. Doors slid silently open for them as they approached, sheets of bullet-proof glass that would stand almost impregnable unless the electric scanners fed the correct information from disk to computer.

Drake and Sawyer strolled without slowing past innumerable closed doors to the inner office of the man they called John Reed.

Who was the man called John Reed?

A lot of people all over the world had asked that question. For that matter, what was Department X? It was not listed among official government agencies. Yet it worked with the Pentagon and the State Department, and even more closely with the CIA.

John Reed—of course it was not his real name. His face was stiff and faintly luminous, as though he had undergone extensive plastic surgery. He walked briskly, but he was not young. One thing Eddie Sawyer knew. He demanded implicit life and death obedience from his staff. He was on intimate confidential terms with every law and order bureau on four continents. And—he paid well, and protected his men—as much as protection was worth in the most dangerous game in the free world,—espionage and counter espionage.

It was a good deal, if you were young and liked danger and a good salary and knew enough to ask no questions.

It was Department X. And the man called John Reed was its boss.

Both agents walked these sleek corridors without giving their organization conscious thought, but deep in their minds they were aware with the rich sense of pride that made their life-risking jobs worthwhile, of the unceasing throb of crime-fighting life that had its strong heart in this building.

It sent its agents everywhere, on a moment's notice, by jet, submarine, camel or llama. Some returned. Many didn't. But for everyone that went out, the world found itself a little better, a little cleaner.

The weaponry was constantly being refined, improved, altered, replaced. Its personnel was secretly trained, and highly dedicated. Pentagon controlled, yet free to act independently, it had agents everywhere. Eddie Sawyer and Pete Drake were proud to be numbered among them, these men who had varied backgrounds, but one common enemy, international crime.

The man called John Reed glanced up from his briefing TV screen as Eddie Sawyer and Pete Drake entered his office. He smiled but did not speak until the thick doors had slid shut behind his operatives.

"I've gotten a full report on the victim Roy Gravewright," he said. "Washington finds nothing of consequence." A doughy-looking, pipe-chewing man built in the Douglas MacArthur mold, without that great general's flamboyance, Reed's mind was stock-piled with a hundred urgent matters so he never had time for trivia such as greetings, or pleasantries on the weather.

When one approached him, he may have been struggling for hours with some insoluble problem of crime and politics and he would

expound on it without preamble, and heaven help the man who couldn't keep up.

"We checked on Gravewright with the police," Drake said. "He seems to have been an inoffensive social security number who idled his free time with impractical inventions."

The man called John Reed glanced at the graying briefing screen. "Yes. And this brings us to the reason why. Was the assassin shooting at you, Sawyer, at Gravewright, or at this Dr. Mountain? By the way, we seem to have nothing on a Dr. Mountain. What sort of person is he? A man of international consequence?"

Eddie Sawyer smiled. "Dr. Mountain is a very lovely woman. She recently completed her internship at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and is presently employed by the U.S. Public Health Service."

Reed gestured with his pipe. "A woman. Since she was with you, Sawyer, I should have assumed her sex—and her beauty."

"And he took her to Charlie's—in the village," Drake added mildly.

Reed frowned. "We can't discard the possibility that this could have been an attempt on your life?"

Sawyer shook his head. "I've been over it from all angles. There's one thing. No one knew I was going to that restaurant."

"You didn't call ahead for reservations?" Reed asked.

"At Charlie's, you don't have to," Pete Drake said.

"I didn't make reservations," Eddie Sawyer said. "Nobody could have known where we were going." He frowned. "It doesn't make sense yet. But it would look like somebody wanted to kill Roy Gravewright. But I'm sure that Candy knew Gravewright, she recognized him. Then the silencer and a telescopic sight were turned on us, after Gravewright was struck in the temple. He died instantly. Whoever it was, they weren't shooting at Gravewright the second or third time."

"I'll order immediate analysis," Reed said. "Meantime, as soon as you can talk to Dr. Mountain."

"Wait a minute! That's it!" Sawyer stood up. "Somebody else did know where we were going. Candace Mountain asked me where I was taking her, and she left the address with her physicians' answering service."

"Ah." Reed sighed with the anticipation of a hunting dog suddenly unleashed. He appeared to have forgotten Sawyer and Drake, pressing buttons and snapping out staccato commands.

IV

EDDIE SAWYER called General Hospital from a street pay phone near his apartment. The hospital

receptionist reported Dr. Moun-
tain resting as well as could be ex-
pected. She could not be disturbed,
by orders of Dr. Ames.

From old wary habit, he had
left the booth door opened so he
stood in darkness as he talked.
Now he propped it open a moment
longer, checking both ways along
the shadowed street.

A man paused with a small
French poodle near the curb at the
far corner. Sawyer walked near the
building. He strode through glass
doors into the warmly illumined
corridor. He used a key, entered
the lobby and stepped into the ele-
vator. He pressed the top number,
sank against the wall, taking the
weight off his left foot.

Stepping out of the tan elevator
into the pastel-hued corridor that
led nowhere except to his own
front door, he thought about Can-
dace's being shot because she'd
come near him. He tried to put it
all from his mind.

It wasn't that easy. Instinctively
he sensed something wrong, even
before he saw the tiny crimson
bulb, like the wink of a firefly, at
the top left corner of his door,
warning that something was off-key
inside his apartment. Reaching in-
side his jacket, he removed his .38
Special from its holster.

Two minutes later, he stared
through the two-way mirror on the
narrow door of his foyer closet,
casing his apartment. Except that
lights glowed in living room lamps



that he'd extinguished, everything
appeared peaceful. Then he
glimpsed a shadowed form
crouched on his divan.

Sawyer stepped from the closet
with the .38 Special at his side. He
said, "Tag. You're it."

He caught his breath when the
woman lunged upward from the
couch, crying out as if he, and not
she, were intruding. She spun
around. For a breathless second
they stared at each other without
speaking.

He whispered it, incredulously,
"Candy!"

"D-do you always come in
through your foyer closet?" Candy
whispered. Her face was ashen.

"Only when I've unexpected
guests." Eddie Sawyer thrust his
gun into its holster and crossed the
room. "What are you doing here?"

Candy tried to smile. "I'm not
dressed for company. My hospital
gown and my cape; that's all I

could find." She sank against the divan back rest as if suddenly depleted.

"You should be in the hospital."

"For a tiny fracture of the clavicle?" Candy shook her head. "They swabbed, bandaged it. What else can they do?" She smiled wanly.

Eddie said, "What was urgent enough to bring you out of the hospital in gown and cape?"

"The police. I heard them talking. I heard that Roy Gravewright was killed."

"Then you did know the man at the restaurant?"

"Of course I did."

"Was it an accidental shooting—or something planned?"

She touched his hand as if needing something to cling to. "I think it was planned. I'm so sure of it I'm scared sick." She shuddered. "You see, he was doing lab tests for me. A *bacillus anthracis* test on bone-meal."

"What?"

"There can be *bacilli anthracis* enough to wipe out thousands of animals in feed—say bone-meal, and yet one or two lab tests can miss the anthrax spores. I knew anthrax spores were in that bone-meal, and Roy promised to keep running tests until he proved it for me. He must have proved I was right, called my answering service, found out where we were—"

"And got there in time to get himself killed," Sawyer said. "Why

would he come down to Greenwich Village that time of the night looking for you with lab test results?"

"Because it was important!"

"It must have been."

She tilted her chin. "Because it was important—but what's the use? I see you're not going to believe me."

"How do you know until you tell me?"

"I won't have you laughing at me! Those West Virginia hog farmers. They laughed at me, even when that poor woman lay there dead. Even when I warned them their hogs were infected, that the woman had died from anthrax, and they might die. I was just a silly woman. I could see it in their faces. I went to my own bosses—the Public Health Service. You know what they told me between laughs? That there hadn't been anthrax in the United States in over forty years."

"But you're convinced there is now?"

"Go on! Laugh," Candy raged. "And I'll push you out that window. I've had the laughter of my betters up to here!"

"I'm not laughing, Candy—"

"My name is Candace! Dr. Candace Mountain. You'll have to forgive my temper outburst. I've had to go without dinner, I've been shot at, laughed at, operated upon and condescended to, all by men who know everything. I say there

is going to be an anthrax epidemic in this country and that it could wipe out the swine and cattle production for years to come.

"Maybe I'm crazy. But suppose I'm not? Stop laughing long enough to think what would happen to the economy of the United States—and then of the world—if the swine and cattle market were suddenly completely wiped out?"

"All right. From anthrax I know nothing. But I know a woman roused when I see one. I'm not laughing. I'm not even smiling. I'm with you all the way!"

THE LABORATORY technician stared up at Eddie Sawyer and Candy.

"What kind of tests?" he mumbled. Obviously, despite the fact his test tubes and trays brimmed with cultures and specimens awaiting analysis, he'd been sacking out. Their entering the lab office had wakened him.

Candy explained the nature of Roy's tests to him. A middle-aged man in a soiled smock, the technician was an easy-smiling, sly man who yawned and scratched himself as Candy talked, not even bothering to listen.

The technician waved his hand. "Yeah. Well, Roy and me worked different shifts. I'm afraid I wouldn't know anything about a test like that."

"There have to be records," Sawyer reminded him.

"Well, I don't have time to look for them now."

"I suggest you take time," Sawyer told him mildly. "The quicker you find those results for us, the sooner we let you get back to your beauty nap—and you need it."

Grudgingly, the technician fingered through the files. He looked up, smirking in triumph, announcing that there were no anthrax spores results, no bone-meal tests, no records that Roy Gravewright had conducted any tests.

"And I reckon that just about covers it every which way," he said.

Dr. Mountain's face was taut, her eyes glittering with outrage. "But there were tests made. I got Dr. Swain's permission for Roy to run them for me."

The technician shrugged. "Then why don't you come back tomorrow, eight to five, when Dr. Swain is here?"

Candy barely contained her rage until they were outside the pathology lab. "Now somebody has stolen the specimens, the results, and the records. Doesn't that prove I'm right?" She stared at Sawyer unblinkingly.

V

EDDIE SAWYER, Candace and Drake entered John Reed's office in the Department.

"Four o'clock in the morning!" Candy whispered, awed. "You'd

never guess it wasn't high noon in this place."

The man called John Reed looked up from the reports on his desk. He smiled. "All hours are terrible for somebody, Miss Mountain. Crime doesn't keep office hours. We can't keep them, either."

Sawyer said, "We're going to lay before you a hypothetical defense case, sir, and let you decide if you want to make anything of it."

"Let me be the judge," John Reed suggested.

Candace nodded. "Suppose some organization wanted to destroy the economy of the United States and ultimately the economy of the free world. Would that be of interest to you, sir?"

"Of vital interest," Reed agreed mildly.

"Well, no one else is interested. I warn you, I've been laughed at and brushed off ever since that poor woman died."

"What woman is that, Dr. Mountain?" Reed said.

Candy drew a deep breath. She stared at her hands. "Mrs. Gretchen Mannheimer. She had an illness that frightened her local doctor and her neighbors in West Virginia. The public health service sent me out to see her. But when I got out to the Mannheimer Swine farm, Gretchen Mannheimer was dead. I made tests and told them Mrs. Mannheimer had died of

anthrax—a communicable disease, which I believed she had contracted from the swine on that farm."

"Anthrax?" Pete Drake blinked.

Candy glanced at him. "It's highly contagious. Its causative agent is *Bacillus Anthracis*. Its spores have an incubation, or period of latency, of about seven days, usually less than four days. It's transmitted through any substance capable of absorbing and transmitting the contagion, or it can be transmitted by direct contact with infected tissues—the meat of infested hogs. This last is the way I diagnosed as the mode of transmission causing Mrs. Mannheimer's death. As to this dread disease, there is no permanent immunity, and no vaccine available."

"What was the reaction of the medical men and the farmers when you gave them your diagnosis?" Reed asked.

"They said I ought to get married and raise kids, and leave medicine to men."

"You reported your findings to the public health service?"

"Of course. I made tests and I was positive I found anthrax spores in bone meal the Mannheimers had recently purchased and were feeding as a supplement to their swine. But PHS is cautious beyond cautious. They'd almost rather risk an epidemic than upset anyone, especially if they

happen to be politically influential, and some of these farmers most certainly were."

Candace drew her gaze across their faces. "So that was when I came to New York and to Dr. Lawton Swain's lab. He was my professor of epidemiology in medical school. I thought if any man would believe me, it would be the man who has spent his life studying and teaching the horrors of epidemics.

"Dr. Swain didn't exactly laugh. He told me I was wrong, but he permitted Roy Gravewright to run tests for me. Because I was so upset, poor Roy agreed to keep trying until he found a sampling that proved my diagnosis. If anthrax had killed the swine and Mrs. Mannheimer, those spores had to be there.

"Then I remembered that Mr. Sawyer was an agent—for a government agency called Department X. It seemed to me only some enemy of the free world would execute a plan as vicious as this.

"Doesn't Roy Gravewright's death prove that there were anthrax spores? Roy must have found them. Why else would he come looking for me? Why else would somebody try to kill Roy and me—unless I am right? I know that anthrax is infecting the animals on that Mannheimer farm, and I need to find out on how many others.

"If the spores are in shipments

of bone meal—it could be transported by train all over the U.S. in a matter of days. Hogs and cattle would die of that high communicable disease, and if they were not destroyed, buried deeply, and their pens disinfected immediately, the contagion could spread to human beings. Nothing could stop an epidemic once it got started. There's only one way to stop it—find the source and destroy it."

For some moments there was silence. Then John Reed said, "Well, as you have guessed, Doctor, we work independently. We can act without the definite proof that official government agencies would require. Panic is an easy thing to spread, too. Public health and civilian defense well know this. They cannot act without final proof. It's too dangerous. Since we work in secret, we have no such limitations."

Candace stared at him. "You're going to—help?"

The man called John Reed nodded. "It seems to me that your being shot, and Roy Gravewright's being killed, the samples and test records being stolen or destroyed, is proof enough. Something is amiss. We can't turn our backs on this kind of evidence.

"To me—and I can tell by the faces of my friends here—that they agree. Spreading ruin through germs has the ugly smell of our old enemies behind the Iron Curtain."

Candy sank into a chair, buried

her head in her arms. She wept silently.

VI

THE WHIRLING chopper blades stirred the coppery West Virginia dust and bent stalks of lush grass into a whitened landing area.

Inside the 'copter, Dr. Candace Mountain slept, blonde head snuggled against Eddie Sawyer's shoulder. Her arm in a sling was her only concession to her wound. Despite her medical degrees, asleep she looked like a young girl with softly kissable lips and slightly upturned nose.

Eddie Sawyer shook her gently. "Doctor. Wake up. We're here."

Candace sat up, instantly awake, all business. Across the aisle, Pete Drake stared through a window. He spoke fervently. "Now I know exactly how General Custer felt."

Sawyer jerked up his head, staring through his window. Moments ago this field had appeared somnolent, uninhabited. Suddenly the helicopter was surrounded by armed men running from the cover of trees.

The pilot turned. "Mayday. Shall I chicken out while we're all total?"

"Stick fast," Sawyer ordered.

"Those are real men and real guns," the pilot said.

"And they could put real bullets in your gas tank before you got off the ground," Sawyer told him.

"Don't they know we're on their side?" the pilot said. He raised his hands high.

"They're upset," Candace said, standing up. She gripped her medical kit. "I'm sure we can talk to them."

The pilot lowered one arm to activate the door and metal ladder switch. Guns came up threateningly. He smiled wider and motioned toward the door. The men on the ground waited as the whirring motor swung out the ladder to the grass.

Sawyer stepped past Candy and preceded her to the ground. He reached up to help her. The men crowded forward, guns held in readiness.

"You people can get back on that thing and clear out of here."

At the sound of the voice, Sawyer stiffened. He stared at the overalled, denim-shirted speaker. It was a big blonde girl in her early twenties.

Her face was set and cold. "You think I'm joking, you just push us a little bit."

The other farmers muttered in assent.

"We've come to help you people," Candy said, ignoring the guns.

"We got all the trouble we need," a farmer said, "without any help from outsiders."

"What you've got is anthrax," Sawyer said.

The girl's voice lashed out. "Now don't start that! We're willing you

get in that thing and fly out. But do it now!"

"We only ask you to allow us to make some tests," Candy said, smiling and patient.

"We don't want no tests," a man said. "There hasn't been no anthrax around here in more than forty years."

"But your hogs have got 'white bristle', haven't they?" Candy said. "Carbuncle swelling on their throats. They're having a lot of trouble breathing and swallowing, aren't they?"

"Get out of here!" the blonde girl ordered.

"What's the matter with you people?" Pete Drake said.

The blonde girl stared at him. Her gray eyes were wide and enraged, but they softened faintly, touching his. She said, "I'll tell you what's the matter with us. We've had it with you government people! Telling us how to live. Starting poverty wars that put no money in our pockets, only in those that already have it. Now, you want us to kill off all our hogs—"

The blonde straightened, hefting the shotgun in the crook of her arm. "Hogs are all we've got to live on!" she said. The other farmers agreed, loudly. She drew strength from their support. "Now, you people want to come in and kill them off so we can't sell them. What are we going to live on?"

"Flesh of all animals dying of any form of this disease is poison-



ous," Candy said, projecting her voice to the farthest farmer. "The blood and the discharges of such animals can not only spread the disease among others of the same species, but also can cause the thing you farmers call the 'malignant pustule' among humans. It's fatal! Are you going to let your diseased animals poison all the rest of your stock—and your families—and anyone who touches that poisoned flesh?"

A farmer said, "We told you. We got trouble, we handle it our own way. Now, lady, me for one, I'm tired talking. You people best get out of here."

Sawyer said, "I understand you people are upset, but you better listen to the doctor before it's too late."

"You the doctor?" a farmer said truculently.

"No." Sawyer nodded toward Candy. "This is Dr. Mountain."

One of the farmers hooted in

rage. "Ho! So that's her! She's the dame started all this trouble!"

"Have you people gone insane?" Sawyer said. "She didn't start your trouble. She *found* it for you. She told you—"

"Look, mister, we're hog farmers. No woman is going to tell me to kill off two hundred head of swine just because they're a little sick."

The voices of the men rose to a growl and they crowded dangerously closer.

"Wait a minute!" Candy Mountain cried. She did not waver or retreat one step.

Sawyer watched her in admiration.

"All right!" Candy's tone matched theirs. "You don't need me. Will you just allow me to make some tests—"

"No!" A farmer sprang forward. "We done told you, woman! How many times we got to tell you?"

He grabbed the medical kit from Candy's arm, the force staggering her.

The farmer hefted the kit and hurled it with all his strength against the helicopter.

Sawyer lunged past Candy. He caught the farmer by the collar and jerked him around, shoving him into the crowd of farmers. Sawyer walked into the butt of a rifle. It caught him across the bridge of the nose, stopping him as if poled. His knees buckled and he sank to the ground.

VII

EDDIE SAWYER opened his eyes cautiously. He tried not to blink because the impact of his eyelids was agony. After a moment, he realized he was lying on a cot spread on the porch of a farmhouse. Morning sunlight flooded the yard.

He turned his head slowly, feeling as if little men were blasting with dynamite behind his eyeballs.

Beside him, Pete Drake sat slumped-shouldered, legs dangling over the edge of the porch. Beyond Drake, the gun across her legs, sat the big blonde.

"Where's Candy?" Sawyer said dazedly.

"She's around," Drake said. "She's making her tests on some of the swine out back."

Sawyer frowned. "How'd she work it?"

"The fight went out of them when the guy poled you with that gun butt."

"Always glad to be a peacemaker."

"We're good people," the blonde said. "It's just that we're in bad trouble. We don't know what we're going to do. We don't know how we're going to live if they kill off all our stock." Suddenly she straightened, jumped off the porch, standing with her gun at ready before her.

"What's the matter now?" Pete said.

"Somebody's coming," the

blonde said across her shoulder. "Don't you hear the car?"

"I don't hear anything," Drake said.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Then you let Heidi handle it."

"Sure," Sawyer said. He sat up slowly. "Let Heidi handle it."

"What choice do we have?" Pete grunted. "She's even taken our guns. Some of the farmers say Dr. Mountain isn't going near their land, and Heidi took our guns in case we tried to get pushy."

At this moment, Dr. Mountain came around the corner of the house, followed by three or four farmers. Their faces were pallid, but Candy's eyes were alight with the zeal of the crusader.

"We found it!" she cried. "One of these farmers is old enough to remember the last case of anthrax out here. Some of the swine have the true apoplectic form of anthrax. Some of those animals are dying in convulsions."

"I recall it," the elderly farmer agreed. "They called it the choking charbon in them days. But I seen it like this. I seen hogs dying like this."

"None of these animals can be saved," Candy said. "It's too late for treatment. They'll have to be killed, buried, the pens disinfected thoroughly."

Heidi had been staring at the late model tan car racing along the lane toward the farm yard, but now she swung around. "You can't do

that! Not without proof that it really is anthrax! Why, we'd have nothing! You'd ruin us!"

"You are ruined, Heidi," Pete said. "But you'll also be dead, if you don't do what she says."

Heidi stared at him, her gaze softening. "I'd like to do what you think best," she said in an uncertain tone. Then her voice hardened. "No. We got to have more proof."

The tan car raced into the yard, plumes of dust clouding over the people as it braked down and stopped.

Candy said, "Why here's Dr. Dell. Now you won't have to take my word for it."

In his late thirties, Dr. Glenn Dell was slender, of medium build, with dry brown hair brushed back on his narrow head. He was not smiling.

"Dr. Mountain," he said. "It was my understanding that you had been relieved of any responsibility in this matter. As regional director of PHS, I expect my directives to be obeyed."

Candy still did not answer. She was staring at the other man getting slowly out of the PHS car. In his fifties, his hair completely gray, uncombed, the man had wide, heavy shoulders, a bull neck, keg-like chest and huge body.

"Oh, Dr. Swain!" Candy whispered thankfully.

Dr. Swain straightened, leaning against the door. He set his cane and turned, his full lipped mouth

and kindly gray eyes settling on Candy.

"My loveliest pupil," he said. "I taught epidemiology to many doctors, but never to a prettier one, or one more headstrong."

"Thank goodness you've come, Dr. Swain," Candy said. "It looks like I'm going to need all the help I can get."

"Despite the fact that Dr. Swain is here," Dr. Dell said, "I can tell you, Dr. Mountain, your future with PHS rests on results of my tests out here today."

"I'm willing to abide by that," Candy agreed.

Dr. Dell stiffened. "Have you any idea, young woman, of the panic that could result from false rumors spreading in this country?"

"I had proof!" Candy insisted. "I took samplings to Dr. Swain's laboratory at the University in New York." She gripped Dr. Swain's hand tighter. "Is that why you came down here, Dr. Swain? To help me? Roy did find those anthrax spores in that bone meal, didn't he?"

Dr. Lawton Swain exhaled heavily. He patted Candy's head. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said softly.

Candy gazed at the stout doctor, shaking her head. "But Roy had to have found proof. Why else would he come looking for me down in Greenwich Village?"

Dr. Swain sighed again, as if saying things he dreaded having to

utter. "I sent Roy looking for you, Candace."

"But why?"

"Because there was no proof. I came back as Roy was finishing up. Poor fellow. Never a more loyal or faithful technician. Said he had nothing better to do than to work for you, but that he had found nothing."

"But then why would you send him looking for me?"

"He insisted because you said every minute counted. And I know you, Candace. I know how headstrong you are. I wanted to stop you before you got too deeply involved."

Candy shook her head as if stunned. Then she said, "But the records, the samples, the tests, everything was stolen—"

Dr. Swain shook his head gently. "I removed those tests, records, samples."

"Why?" Sagging, Candy stared at Dr. Swain.

"Because you were my prize pupil. I didn't want anything like this on your record later on, when it might affect your chances for advancement. I was thinking about you. I wanted to save you embarrassment."

Candy tilted her head. Sawyer saw the suspicious moisture glinting in her eyes. But she kept herself erect, her lips taut. Eddie said, "This is all very well. But Roy Gravewright was killed. Somebody shot at Dr. Mountain. Since you're

out here anyhow, Dr. Dell, why don't you inspect these hogs and tell us—what's really wrong with them?"

DR. DELL straightened in the stall where an infected hog had been secured for his examination. His face was gray. He closed his medical kit with a sharp snap, moved his steady gaze across the anxiously waiting faces of the sweated farmers.

"Anthrax," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "Definitely anthrax. This particular animal is suffering the true apoplectic, or spleen, form of anthrax. It will be dead in a few hours. There's nothing we can do for it now. I'm sorry."

"No," Heidi whispered. "Oh, no."

"I'm sorry," Dr. Dell said again. He did not look at Candy.

An hour later Eddie Sawyer stood beside Candace with Dr. Dell, Dr. Lawton Swain, Pete Drake and Heidi in the morning sun, watching a bulldozer gouge an eight-foot trench beyond the swine pens.

The morning silence was shattered by the gunfire of men with rifles.

They stood around the pens firing at the swine, repeating the shots when one of the animals moved or even shuddered in its death throes.

Heidi could not speak. She stood



with the back of her hand pressed over her mouth. She trembled every time one of the guns fired at the pens behind them.

Eddie said, "There's just one thing now, Dr. Dell."

Dr. Dell tautened almost perceptibly. He kept his face straight ahead. "Yes, Mr. Sawyer."

"You have proved that Dr. Mountain is right about anthrax. Here and on the Mannheimer farm."

"Yes. My apologies to Dr. Mountain," Dr. Dell said reluctantly.

"You miss my point, Dr. Dell," Eddie Sawyer said. "I hope not purposely."

"What are you suggesting?" Dr. Dell asked. He turned, his face burning.

"I'm suggesting the word you don't seem to want to face, Doctor,"

Eddie said. "The word is epidemic."

"We have no proof!" Dr. Dell said sharply.

"Aren't you going to try to get proof?" Eddie persisted. "Didn't Dr. Mountain offer you that—with her samples of bone meal?"

"You won't panic me into anything, Sawyer," Dr. Dell said. "You heard as well as I did what Dr. Swain said about those bone-meal samples. Negative."

Eddie's voice was cold. "Dr. Swain explained the samples, and why Roy was looking for Dr. Mountain in Greenwich Village, but he didn't explain why Roy was killed, and Dr. Mountain shot."

"We have no proof that the two incidents are related," Dr. Dell said. "Until we have such proof, we'll have to assume they were not related."

Sawyer stared at the doctor. He said, "Mr. Drake and I are interested only in the epidemic aspects of this case. I'll tell you, Dr. Dell. We'll get you the proof of epidemic, and we'll find its source for you. I only hope we're not too late."

VIII

HEIDI clasped the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles showed white. "All right," she said, her voice quavering. "You talk to these people in this farm up here, by yourself."

Pete Drake found the farm owner, along with two men in dungarees and denim shirts who were apparently hired hands, standing near the entrance to the barn. They stood silently in the slanting sunlight, staring at him as he crossed the yard.

"You came about my pigs?" the farmer said.

Drake nodded.

"You can't see them," the farmer said. "They're all right. I got no sick pigs. We don't need you here."

"I won't go near your pigs. But there is one thing I'd like to ask you. Have you bought any bone meal in the past week?"

"I might have. What's it to you?"

"Sir, I'd like a can of it—a scoop in a coffee can, anything. I'd be pleased to pay you for it."

"We got none to spare. Now get out, or we run you out."

Pete Drake said, "It's very important I get a sample of that bone meal."

One of the men standing with the farmer nudged him. The farmer glanced toward the man. Pete checked him, too, the hackles rising along his neck. The clothes were right, but the hands of the two hired men were not even as work-roughened as Heidi's. There were no stains or mud on their work shoes.

The farmer nodded suddenly. "All right. You get the bone meal. You'll find a tin can in by the

barrel, there in the barn. You get it and then you clear out."

The three men stepped aside, leaving a path between them. Pete Drake walked warily, going into the darkened, musty-smelling barn. He was aware the three men had followed him inside, but he did not look back. He wanted to, and he felt a place itching between his shoulder blades the size of a target's bulls-eye.

Drake found the feed and grain sacks, barrels and crates. A tin can lay on its side on the floor. He picked it up, shook it out upside down. On sacks resting beside the barrel of bone meal were printed the words he had read at all the other neighboring farms today: *Blue Ridge Feed & Tankage Company, Eastfield, West Virginia.*

He sighed. He had learned that every farmer who owned sick animals had bought bone meal in the past week from the Blue Ridge Feed & Tankage Company.

Pete Drake dipped the tin can into the barrel of bone meal, taking up a sample to add to all the others waiting for him in Heidi's jeep. He straightened, and turned, and stopped.

The three men stood immobile, barring his way to the wide barn doors. The two hired men held pitchforks.

Peter Drake shook his head. "No sense in this. I got the samples; I'm leaving."

"Sure. You're leaving," one of the hired men said.

The farmer did not move. It was as though suddenly the whole bit had gotten out of hand. The hired men advanced slowly, the pitchforks at ready before them.

Pete retreated a step. "Call them off, mister."

The hired men laughed. One of them said, "This is between the three of us, Drake."

Pete Drake stared at them, and past them at the set, troubled face of the farmer, and beyond him, the wide double doors and sunlight. It was an impossible distance away.

His hand moved up, touched at his empty shoulder holster. The hired men advanced and he retreated. He looked around helplessly. There was nothing to use as armor or weapon against the lethal tines of those pitchforks.

He glanced across his shoulder. At the far end of the barn was an elevated feed-window. He figured the distance, his chance of making it.

One of the men lunged forward suddenly, prodding at him with the pitchfork. In a sudden move, Pete hurled the contents of the tin can into the man's face, blinding him.

The man yelled, falling back, slapping at the bone meal in his eyes and face. The other leaped forward, striking at him. Drake did a dance step backwards, jumped up on a wired bundle of hay and over it. The man advanced

steadily, crouched forward, watching Pete, who grabbed up a cube of hay, grunting as he threw it toward the pitchfork.

The man knocked the hay aside, running at Drake with the pitchfork raised. He yelled at his partner. "Watch him. Don't let him get by me!"

Almost at the raised feed window, Pete Drake hesitated, hearing a caterwauling of grunting, snuffling, squeals. He stopped cold, only inches from the glittering points of the pitchfork. There were hog pens beyond that window. These men meant to impale him with pitchforks, or force him through the window to be slain by the hogs.

The pitchfork raked at him like wildcat claws. Instinctively, he leaped backwards. He found himself against the low wall. He breathed heavily, watching the men advancing with the pitchforks.

"Go on, Drake. It's these pitchforks, or them hogs. You got your choice, the way you want to go."

The pitchforks were thrust at him. Drake sucked in his breath, pulling in his belly, standing tall against the barn wall. He put his hands behind him, caught at the sill. A pitchfork raked his side, ripping his jacket. He vaulted upward.

A pitchfork caught him in the back, sending him forward faster. The hogs squealed, raging below him. He heard Heidi scream from

the barnyard, and then he was sprawling across the bristled backs of the hogs. Those that could get at him slashed with their tusks.

Pete Drake scrambled toward the fence. He felt something like a razor slash at his leg. His trousers were ripped away, blood spurting from his calf. The hogs were maddened by the smell of blood.

He heard Heidi screaming his name. He looked up, seeing the big blonde girl at the fence. She struck at the hogs around him with a long pole. He leaped toward the fence, felt Heidi's hands catching at his ripped clothing and then he was lifted up easily, and swung clear of the pens.

Drake landed on his knees, already struggling up. He panted toward Heidi, "We got to get out of here. Those guys will kill us."

"I don't think so," Heidi said. She held one of the .38 Specials she had taken from him and Eddie Sawyer earlier. She handed the other one to him.

Despite the fact that he was bruised and bleeding, Pete felt better with the gun in his hand. Somehow the odds were no longer so overwhelming.

They backed away toward the jeep. The farmer and the two men with pitchforks ran to the double doors of the barn. They saw the guns and stopped there.

"Why'd you decide to help me?" Pete Drake asked as they reached the jeep.

Heidi said, "Those two hired men of Jensen's. I never saw them around here before. I think something is very wrong."

Drake sagged into the jeep seat. He shuddered, his whole body wracked suddenly at the memory of those slashing tusks.

She touched his arm. "You're all right now."

"Sure," he said. "I'm all right now. And I know all I need to know. Blue Ridge Feed and Tankage Company. Most beautiful words in the world."

He still shivered. Puzzled, Heidi drew him to her, comforting him. "You must be feverish," she said.

"Sure," Drake said. "I'm feverish. Let's go. While we can."

THE BLUE RIDGE Feed & Tankage Company at Eastfield was a complex of manufacturing, sales, packaging, storage, buildings sprawled across gray acres of railroad tracks, silos, bins, conveyors, tanks and smoking chimneys. It was entirely enclosed by chain-link fence. Sawyer parked his car at the administration building and got out, along with Pete Drake, Candy, Dr. Swain and Dr. Dell.

The plant manager paced his office. A tall, wide-shouldered man in his thirties, Blaisdell wore his shirt cuffs turned back, his shirt collar open, his tie loose. He had listened in silence while Dr. Dell cautiously explained what had happened in the countryside.

"It's within a fifty square miles of your plant," Pete Drake said. "And every place we visited with infected animals had bought bone meal from your place in the past week."

Len Blaisdell nodded. "We just got in a couple of carloads. We're pushing bone meal as a food supplement for swine. Shipped in from Europe, its still cheaper than a lot of domestic feeds."

Pete Drake said, "We're sure the anthrax spores are in that bone meal. We want to prove it, and we want to trace it to its source."

"I'm in business for money," Blaisdell said. "But I've got sense enough to know that anything that hurts this part of West Virginia is going to hit me in the long run. I'll do anything you people suggest."

Candy took her samplings from the train cars which still stood on the Blue Ridge company sidings. Blaisdell nodded toward his yard foreman and he slapped locks on the cars.

"They'll stay like that until we hear from you, Dr. Mountain," he promised.

Dr. Dell said, "And now, Dr. Mountain, I expect you to let me handle this matter from here on in."

Candy glanced at Eddie Sawyer. He nodded. She smiled and agreed. "Of course, Dr. Dell."

Eddie, Pete and Candy remained unmoving beside the dust flaked train cars, watching Blaisdell walk

away with Dr. Swain and Dr. Dell.

"What now?" Candy said.

Sawyer grinned at her. "Baltimore. Where else? We want the source, don't we? Before they can ship train loads in every direction across the country. That's where this bone meal came from!"

IX

EDDIE SAWYER walked with Candy and Drake through the huge doors from the dome-like warehouse out to the massive docks on the Baltimore waterfront.

"There's the ship we're looking for," Drake said. "The S.S. *Harmer*."

They stood, staring up at the metal sea monster. A crane car with cables, winches and giant scoop was secured alongside the *Harmer*. Stretched like an endless procession on the rails were cars waiting to be loaded. Most of the shipping stood idle along the wharf, but the crane lifted its scoop, dipping its opened jaws into the *Harmer's* hold, bringing up bone meal which it swung out and unloaded in the waiting train cars.

"Bone meal," Candy whispered as if the word had some special meaning of horror for her. The *Harmer's* decks, housing and rust-chinked sides were frosted with bone meal; it was smeared over everything.

Eddie Sawyer motioned to Pete Drake and Candy. They followed

him across the wharf to the ship's ladder and up it. A deck-hand glanced up as they came aboard the *Harmer*.

"Ship's captain?" Eddie said.

The deckhand, his face and clothing grayed with meal, jerked his head. "Forward there—the bridge."

The captain was a stocky man, bearded, his gold-leafed cap and freshly pressed suit flaked with meal. He stood near the instrument panel on the bridge, watching them silently.

Pete Drake said, "Captain. We may have news for you—about your cargo."

The captain's expression did not alter. "Yes?"

"We have every reason to believe this shipment of bone meal is contaminated. It is virulent with anthrax spores. You must stop unloading."

The captain stared at them. His sea-weathered face showed no expression. He turned slightly, caught up the ship-to-shore phone and spoke a number into it. He said, "Mr. Clayton Dexter, please. Well, where is he? Of course it's urgent. Get him for me. I don't care where he is; get him down here at once!"

Clayton Dexter came up the ship's ladder three steps at a time. In his forties, he was a man who had worked so fiercely since his teens, he had no idea he had aged, and wouldn't have until someone told him. He moved with the grace of a

man half his age, and he reacted to obstacles with a temper he'd never bothered learning to control.

His face was reddened when he reached the ship's deck, but not from exertion. He glared, angered, at the silent crane, the dock workers standing idle. "What's the meaning of this?" he raged. "Who ordered these men to stop unloading?"

"We did," Eddie Sawyer said.

Dexter stared at Eddie, shoulders and chest heaving. "Well, I hope you've got one hell of an excuse. Fancy and fast!"

"Anthrax," Candace said.

"What?" Dexter spun around, peering at her. "Who are you? And what the devil are you talking about?"

"Dr. Mountain is a PHS doctor," Sawyer said. "She discovered anthrax spores being unloaded from this ship."

"What kind of insanity is this?" Dexter demanded. "How could it be?"

"It could be if somebody wanted it that way," Sawyer said.

"Anthrax spores in cultures could have been incubated in this bone meal before it was loaded aboard your ship—or after," Candace said. "I can tell you this. One shipment has been delivered to a feed and tankage company in Eastfield, West Virginia. Hundreds of swine have become infected with anthrax, and one woman has died from the disease."

Dexter waved his arm violently.



"Don't come to me with that. Hogs die in West Virginia—and bone meal on one of my ships is the source. You'll have to have more proof than that."

"Your shipment of bone meal is contaminated," Candy said coldly. "With anthrax."

Dexter shook his head. "I want proof. Prove it."

"We intend to," Candy said. "These gentlemen have arranged for several labs to work around the clock testing samples from your hold."

"What is this? You make a test, you find nothing, that's it!" Dexter said. "I make a profit if this stuff is shipped—not if it sits here and rots."

He heeled around, shouting at the dock foreman. "Get these people back to work. I want this ship unloaded."

Eddie Sawyer spoke softly, "Mr. Dexter."

Dexter heeled around, voice rasping. "Now what do you want?"

Dexter stopped speaking, and his mouth widened when he saw the .38 in Eddie's hand.

Sawyer said, "You wouldn't listen to common sense. Maybe you'll listen to this."

"This is piracy!" Dexter said. "I'll have the government all over you people!"

"That may well be," Sawyer said. "But that's in the future. It is this moment we're concerned with."

Perspiring, Dexter stared at Sawyer a long moment. He waved his arm. His voice shook. "Knock it off. I'll let you know when. You men stand by."

Candace said placatingly, "We'll take samplings at once, Mr. Dexter. We have a mobile lab on the dock. If we're lucky, it shouldn't take long."

"If you're lucky," Dexter said, "You people will come out of this with half your skin."

Clayton Dexter prowled the wheel room on the bridge of the *Harmer*. His ship's captain sat in a swivel chair, his head back.

Eddie Sawyer said, "If you'll have your shipping office give us a complete list of the shipments already made, perhaps we can lock those cars before any more of this disease spreads."

"You people are out to ruin

me," Dexter said. "That's what you really want, isn't it?"

Sawyer did not answer because at that moment Dr. Lawton Swain appeared in the hatchway with Candy and Pete Drake.

Clayton Dexter said, "Dr. Swain! Thank the lord you got here. What's going on with this anthrax bit?"

"Maybe you'd like to tell us your connection with this ship line, Dr. Swain?" Sawyer broke in.

Dexter spoke sharply, "Dr. Swain is the medical consultant for the company who hired our ship for these shipments. I can assure you that Dr. Swain has tested this stuff before it was brought into the country."

Dr. Swain smiled. "It is simpler to allow Dr. Mountain to learn for herself how wrong she is, Clayton. A matter of hours. I'll assist her as much as possible with the lab tests."

"Do they have any right to stop us like this, Dr. Swain?" Dexter demanded.

"I don't believe they have the authority," Dr. Swain said. "But by cooperating, we can get back to shipment that much faster. That's the really important consideration, eh?"

"Speaking of cooperation, Mr. Dexter," Eddie Sawyer said. "This would include a list of the cars already dispatched, and with their destinations."

Dexter heeled around. He looked

ready to burst, but he flung out his arm in a gesture of resignation. "All right! All right! Stop bugging me. You'll have the listings from my office in ten minutes."

IN THE SHIP radio shack, Eddie Sawyer spoke with John Reed via the short-wave set. The radio operator sat in his swivel chair, listening negligently.

"—and that's the listings of the rail cars already dispatched," Sawyer concluded.

"We'll have each car side-tracked and padlocked," Reed promised, "and so quietly that no one will be wiser. I hope you'll be able to operate your end as unobtrusively."

"So do I, sir. We'll get lab results to you at once. And if you'll send radio instructions for us here, the radio man has promised to deliver the message the moment he receives it from you."

"You'll hear from me as soon as I've met with the council," Reed promised.

"Acknowledged," Sawyer said. "Over and out." He went out on deck, where Dexter stood with Dr. Swain.

Candy came running up the ladder from the pier, Pete Drake behind her. She caught Sawyer's arm. "Spores! They've shown up—in the first tests made down there!"

The radio man came out of his shack. "Message from New York,

Mr. Sawyer. I typed it out for you."

Sawyer nodded, turned and led the way to the radio shack. The others followed, crowding into the small, cluttered room.

Dr. Swain said from the door, "I'll just take that message."

All of them heeled around at the sound of Dr. Swain's voice. Candy cried out, gasping. No one else spoke. They stared at the silenced gun in the doctor's fist.

"Disarm them, Clayton," Dr. Swain ordered.

"Wait a minute," Dexter said. "I'm a ship owner, not a thug. What's the matter with you, Doctor? I want no trouble."

"Then disarm them," Swain ordered. "Or you'll have trouble with me—and my people."

"I'm afraid he means Red China, Mr. Dexter," Sawyer said. "I suggest you do as he says."

Scowling, Dexter removed the guns from the shoulder holsters of the two agents.

"And the message," Swain ordered.

Dexter removed the sheet of typewritten paper from Eddie's fingers.

"I'll take them, Dexter," Swain said. "Just move easy. No sudden movements."

He took the guns, dropping them in the sagging pockets of his jacket. Something about the look of him with coat misshapen, straggly gray hair over the doctor's high

forehead, triggered recall in Sawyer's mind.

"Greenwich Village," he said. "You, in a hat and jacket you bought at a Fourteenth Street rummage sale. But you, eh, Swain, same gun, same silencer."

Swain shrugged. He shoved the message into his hip pocket, gazing at Candy with something like regret in his eyes. "I tried every way I could to stop you, Candace. I didn't want to kill you then. I don't want to kill you now. You leave me no choice."

"You tried to kill her in Greenwich Village, tried to discredit her in Eastfield. Good thing Candy was your favored pupil," Eddie Sawyer said.

"One mustn't let sentiment cloud his reason, Mr. Sawyer."

"Oh, certainly not, Doctor."

"As I am sure your Department X is well aware," Dr. Swain said. "This operation is one of the biggest the country I represent has yet instituted—the destruction of the economy of the United States, and ultimately of the world through the devastation of the cattle and swine market. Too big to allow the feelings one might have for any individual to interfere."

Dr. Swain jerked his head toward Clayton Dexter. "Now, tell those dockhands to get back to work unloading this ship. Move!"

"Look. I want out of this," Dexter said. "I told you. I want no trouble."

"Then tell those men to get to work, or your trouble will be as fatal as that facing our meddling friends from the Pentagon."

Dexter stood a moment on the upper deck and then suddenly lunged for a companionway, running toward the gangplank ladder. He almost made it. A seaman on the deck raised himself slightly, hurled a belaying pen that caught Dexter in the back of the head.

Swain shouted over the side, "Take Dexter to his country place. Keep him there until you hear from me." He turned then, gazing at Candy, Sawyer and Drake. "Now. Which of you will be next?"

X

SWAIN AND his agents, most of them dressed as longshoremen and AB seamen, secured Eddie Sawyer, Candy and Pete Drake with ropes and dumped them into an airless stateroom aft.

They lay, bound hands between their shoulder-blades and ankles crossed, on the musty-carpeted deck.

Candy bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Eddie."

"Think nothing of it," he said. "Crowded quarters like this puts everyone on edge."

The stateroom hatch was pushed open and Dr. Swain entered. Sweating, he mopped his heavy-jowled face with a sodden handkerchief. He chewed on a

cigar in the corner of his mouth, apparently unaware that its fire was dead.

He stood gazing down at them, a faint tic flicking in the lower lid of his left eye. Then he cocked his head, listening in apparent satisfaction to the rumble of the motors unloading the deadly bone meal from the hold of the ship.

"Do you hear?" he asked. "Did you really think you could stop me?"

"Getting that stuff aboard train cars still isn't delivering it," Drake said.

"I suppose not. But don't waste your time. You're under guard here. You're as good as dead. I realize you have been in contact with the redoubtable Mr. John Reed. He'll make some effort to get in touch with you, and until our shipments are safely underway, I expect to be able to produce at least your voices and your person. As I told you, nothing, no one is going to stop me this time."

Swain mopped at his sweating face. "Too bad we meet under such unfavorable circumstances, Sawyer. In another atmosphere, I believe you might even be a worthy chess opponent."

"No," Sawyer said. "I chose my opponents. I don't knowingly play with murderers."

Swain smiled. "That's because you don't truly understand your epidemics, Mr. Sawyer. Ask lovely Dr. Mountain. She listened to my



lectures. She knows how I feel about the artistry and true cataclysmic power of an epidemic. There have been few perfect ones in recorded history. The black plague. The V.D. devastation soon after Columbus returned to Spain. Influenza during World War I."

"Most epidemics of truly heroic proportions are the blind work of unselective nature. That's why they have failed to wipe out a whole people. Think of an epidemic of a fatal disease with a mind clocking its movement and growth and dissemination. It will leave a mark upon the face of this earth that men will never forget."

"Megalomania," Sawyer said in disgust.

"What?" Swain straightened; stepped toward him. He peered

down at Eddie Sawyer, secured and helpless at his feet. Sweat beaded his forehead, draining down across the fat pockets of his eyes.

"Sorry we can't pursue this further, Sawyer. But I have work to do. Soon the power-mad imperialists of this earth will be bound, belly-prone as you are now." Swain nodded. "Yes. I find it amusingly symbolic that you three are thus prostrated, and I am in command."

He heeled around and strode out, slapping shut the hatch behind him.

Candy shuddered. "If this weren't so evil, it would be like in his classrooms. He always liked to bring his lectures to some dramatic peak and then stride out of the room—exactly like that."

Sawyer said, "I'm afraid this Dr. Swain is a long way removed from the man you knew in those classrooms, Candy."

Pete Drake said, "Maybe he's not infallible."

Eddie Sawyer rolled over, wincing. "What's with you?"

"I mean, like most professors, he's sloppy and careless. Three or four times while they were dragging us up here, he stood within inches of me."

Sawyer grinned in anticipation. "You got one of our guns?"

"Hardly. I had no place to carry it except in my teeth. I'm afraid somebody would have noticed."

"So what did you do?"

"At the moment, John Reed's instructions seemed the most urgent matter. I lifted them from his pocket."

"Where is it?" Eddie Sawyer asked.

"Clutched between my shoulder blades in my hot little fist," Pete Drake said. He spoke to Candy. "Turn on your side, with your back to me. I'll roll as close to you as I can. Take the paper from me and drop it in front of Eddie's face."

The transfer of the radio message was smoothly accomplished. Candy was able to straighten the paper with her fingers before she rolled over and placed it on the floor near Sawyer's chin.

Sawyer read slowly. "Eastfield Samples Confirm Anthrax Virulence. All train cars sealed. You are to take *S.S. Harmer* to sea at once with skeleton crew. Port clearances have been made for you. You will destroy *S.S. Harmer* with explosives at or near latitude 73.0° N and longitude 24.8° W. A Department X helicopter will rendezvous with you at destruction point, thirteen hundred hours."

For some moments there was silence in the stateroom. At last, Pete Drake said, "It's almost sad, isn't it? Reed has such faith in us. Definite orders to execute. A rendezvous to make. And here we are."

"What's even worse for me," Sawyer said, "Is that he was able

to put stops on all those train cars, make all the arrangements for us—in the little time he used—and it's all for nothing."

"Won't they come looking for us," Candy said, "when we don't meet that helicopter?"

"I suppose they will," Drake said. "But you know, I've an idea it will be too late by then—at least for us."

XI

EDDIE SAWYER said, "No. I won't do it."

Pete Drake tilted his head, staring across Candy's prostrate form. "You won't do what?"

"I won't lie here helpless like this. If Reed can come up with a plan as perfect as that and handle all the angles for us—"

"Even port clearance," Drake agreed.

"I can't lie here and let that plan go to waste. You rolled over to Candy. Suppose you roll toward me. I'll meet you. You ought to be able to chew loose the knots on my wrist."

"Why not?" Pete said. "I'm sure you'd do as much for me."

"After you," Sawyer said.

They rolled on the deck. Pete Drake worked at the knots securing Sawyer's wrists. Abruptly his hands broke free. For a moment he sat extending his arms to full-length, flexing his fingers. "How good that feels!"

"Don't tell us about it," Pete grunted. "Make us know it."

Sawyer loosened the ropes about his own ankles, then untied Pete Drake. A few moments later, Candy was freed too. She sat on the deck, massaging her wrists. "We need a gun," she said.

"That's what I love about the medical mind," Eddie Sawyer said. He stood up, walked to the port-holes, checked the passageways through them. "Always the precise diagnosis."

He took up a scale-model whaling ship from the metal dresser, stood admiring it. "Are you ready, Mr. Drake?"

Pete prostrated himself a few feet inside the room from the hatch, lying as if he were tied. "Fire away."

Eddie Sawyer hurled the toy ship against the bulkhead, the splintering sound loud. At once the hatch was thrown open and a man in levis and khaki shirt leaped through, armed with a machine pistol.

Drake lunged forward. The startled guard jerked up his gun, but had no time to use it. Sawyer stepped away from the wall behind him and judo-chopped him across the nape of the neck.

Drake relieved the guard of the gun as he crumpled. He stood up, smiling. "This should do nicely, eh, Doctor?"

Candy gazed at them in awe, smiling uncertainly. Pete handed

over the machine pistol to Sawyer.

"A new Bulgarian model," he said. "Tricky mechanism. Fires an odd-sized caliber. Probably new with Pekin this year, eh?"

Sawyer glanced at its features, checked its butt-load and firing mechanism. "It will be adequate," he decided. "Bar this hatch every way you can, and stay away from the portholes. I'll get back to you as quickly as possible."

Sawyer walked warily along the shadowed, airless passage. He held his breath, listening. He felt sweat break out along his hair line. As he reached each hatchway, he paused cautiously. He didn't deceive himself that there had been only one armed guard aft in the ship.

He reached the end of the passage. Beyond him, sunlight filtered through the faint film of bone meal dust clouding the open decks. The throb of the crane engine vibrated through the shipboards.

He heard the whisper of sound behind him. He retreated into the small protection of the bulkhead around a hatchway. With his left hand he fumbled behind him, turned a handle, easing the hatch open.

Sawyer glanced quickly across his shoulder, exhaling in relief. He was in a small gear locker. He pushed the door almost closed, stood watching the passageway through the narrow opening. He drew a deep breath, held it, as the armed guard approached.

Either a sixth sense was warning the guard, or he had passed his partner's post and missed him. He moved cautiously, head tilted. His finger was on the trigger of a machine pistol that matched the one Sawyer held.

Eddie touched his lips with the tip of his tongue, watching the approaching guard. All the advantage accrued to the thickset man in the passage. He could fire that machine pistol and stay alive. If Eddie Sawyer fired the gun in his hand, Swain's men would swarm all over him, coming from every part of the ship.

Now the thickset man was directly in front of him. Sawyer held his breath, withdrew slightly so the light would not reflect even from the white of his eye.

The man hesitated. His swarthy face contorted into a troubled scowl. Every nerve in his body was activated, warning signals flared in his brain. He stepped toward the passage exit and Sawyer set himself to jerk open the hatch and strike him down with the crowbar his searching fingers had located in the darkness.

But at the instant he drew a breath, setting himself, the guard heeled around directly toward the gear locker. He struck it with the toe of his boot and the mouth of the machine pistol, driving it past Eddie's face.

The guard drove forward fast in the best military manner, follow-

ing his first advantage in one unbroken movement.

He brought the machine pistol up, and crimped his finger on its trigger. But he walked into the curved head of the crowbar, driven into his Adam's apple with all the force Eddie's frantic urgency put behind it.

He gasped, paralyzed and unable to breathe. He dropped the machine pistol, clawing at his neck as he suffocated. Sawyer struck him a second time with the side of his hand. He caught him as he fell, dragging him into the gear locker. Using coiled line, he bound his wrists to his ankles and tied him off around the neck. Then he shoved him into a dark corner.

Eddie Sawyer stashed away the second machine pistol and padded warily out on deck. He saw the guards on every level, all armed, the huge crane swooping from ship's hold to train cars, and back. He ran across the open space and listened a moment before entering the passage outside the captain's quarters.

The passage was empty, silent. He stepped into it. He listened a moment to the murmur of voices inside the cabin before he twisted the hatch handle and thrust it open. He stepped into the cabin, the machine pistol held before him.

The captain lounged in a black leather club chair, his hat off, his feet up on a black leather ottoman. The radio man sat across from him



in a less comfortable straight chair. The radio man held a cup of coffee. It quivered now in his fist.

"Just stay like that," Eddie Sawyer advised. He closed the cabin hatch, secured it.

The captain sat forward, shaking his head. "Just a minute. I don't know what you got in mind. But you're wrong about us. Leahey and me are merchant ship men, that's all. I captain this ship—I know

nothing about virulent bone meal."

"It happened on your ship," Sawyer said.

"I got no part of it," the captain said. "I'm a career merchant man, that's all."

"Looks like you *were* a career man," Sawyer said. "You're going to have a hard time getting out of prison when this thing breaks."

"Wait a minute," Leahey said. "I'm a merchant seaman, too. I didn't even get any messages that even talked about this cargo. We didn't know anything about it."

"You know about it now," Sawyer said. "If you want to come out clean, you've got one last chance to do it."

The captain drew a deep breath. "I'm listening."

"I need help. I need a radio man. I need a helmsman—"

"I'm a radio man," Leahey said.

"And I could be a helmsman," the captain said.

"And the barest minimum engine crew."

"We got diesels. A couple of men could handle her out of the harbor. But you need tugs—"

"Right. That's your first job. And yours, Leahey."

"We're listening," the captain said.

"I want you two to go to the radio shack, arrange for tugs, line up the two diesel men—"

"You can't move this ship out of here without port clearance."

"We've got that. You get the

men, the tugs. Nobody's going to try to stop you—except those men with guns out there."

"They seem pretty efficient."

"Let me worry about that."

The captain stood up. He stared at Eddie Sawyer in admiration and disbelief. His weathered face showed a grudging smile. "You actually believe you're going to pull this off, don't you?"

Sawyer merely nodded. "We're going to try."

XII

EDDIE SAWYER stood at the port-hole in the captain's cabin, looking down on the deck of the *Harmer*. He remained there, unmoving, counting under his breath. After a few moments Leahey and the captain came out of a shadowed passage and crossed in the sun toward the radio shack.

He stared at them. He was conscious of a faint sense of relief and a slight rise of hope. The critical moments had been those when he permitted Leahey and the captain to leave this cabin and go down the companionway to the deck. In that time he felt they would have reached a final decision. They would have signalled to Swain's agents, or they would try to reach the radio shack.

He did not deceive himself about which choice offered the easiest way out for the captain. He had only to betray Sawyer to Swain and

he was out of immediate danger. Sawyer didn't fool himself that the captain wasn't completely aware of all this.

He exhaled now, watching the ship's officer stride across the sun-struck deck. The captain had dressed carefully before emerging from his cabin for this short walk, almost as if he were going before inspection, to a parade—or, Eddie Sawyer thought, wincing, to a funeral.

He stayed where he was until the two men reached the radio shack. He saw them pause, step inside. He breathed out and strode across the room. He listened a moment before he eased out into the passage. He stared both ways, his back pressed against the bulkhead, then he headed aft, machine pistol ready in his fist.

At the passage exitway, he paused. He checked across his shoulder, lifted a leg and stepped across the water-tight sill.

A bullet ripped into the metal, inches from his shoe.

Eddie Sawyer gasped and lunged backward into the passage. He turned as he retreated and saw the two armed men running toward the other end of the passageway.

Another bullet cracked and sang, striking the metal near him. Sawyer did not even hesitate. He crouched low and leaped toward the down ladder. He struck on his belly, going headfirst down the companionway. He caught at steps,

supports, lines just enough to break his headlong plunge.

Striking the deck, Sawyer rolled over. A gun fired above him, the bullet striking metal and ricocheting. He came up on his knees. He pressed the trigger, firing a burst upward through the companionway. The men at the head of the ladder lurched backward. He did not hesitate to check on them. Coming up to his feet, he ran, going deeper into the ship.

He thrust open a hatchway and stared a moment at the gleaming diesels of the engine room. He slammed the hatch shut and ran toward a distant companionway, going up.

He reached it, hearing the pound of running boots in the passage behind him. He went upward, taking the steps two at a time. Reaching a second level, he ran through a water-tight hatch, paused, jerked it closed behind him, twisting the wheel to secure it.

He turned then, running again. He came more slowly up another ladder, hearing shouts and commands rattling across the open deck. He turned to retreat along the passage.

Two men raced toward him. He fired once, slowing them and then leaped through the hatchway to the open deck. Staying close to the bulkhead, he moved to the starboard, seeing the open water of the bay beyond the railing.

A man on an upper level fired

down at him. Sawyer leaped wildly around the corner of the bulkhead and almost collided head-on with an armed man. The Red agent hesitated, and Sawyer did not. For the agent it was a job, for Sawyer it was life or death.

The agent brought his gun up, but Sawyer plowed into him, thrusting him against the railing. He brought his knee upward and the machine pistol downward. As the agent sagged against him, Sawyer lifted him just enough to scuttle him over the side.

He didn't wait to hear the delayed sound of the distant splash. Hugging the bulkhead and crouching beneath the level of the port-holes, he ran along the ship's deck going aft again. When he reached the end of the protected area, men fired from the upper decks. He saw an agent running aft toward him.

Slipping lower, Sawyer fired rapid bursts upward toward the man he could not see. For a moment there was silence from above him and he ran and leaped into the shelter of covered hold, blind bulkhead and narrow air passage.

He crouched there, breathing through his parted lips. It took only reconnoitering to realize he had allowed them to run him into a cul-de-sac, a place where they wanted him.

Either he had to crawl through the narrow air-passage or have them close in on him as they pleased.

For a moment, panting with fatigue, Eddie Sawyer crouched in the shadows, catching his breath. He heard the shouts out there. They had him pinned down. Someone above him and aft was directing the other men's moving in.

Above the din, and the pound of his own heart, the throb of the crane engines and the running men, he either heard Swain's hysteria-edged voice, or in his exhaustion, thought he did: "Kill him! Kill him on sight!"

He pressed back against the ventilator, holding the gun ready, watching as much of the open deck as he could see. *Kill him on sight.* The chips were down.

Crouching there, his breathing less ragged, the exhaustion lessening, Eddie Sawyer thought about breaking out of this trap. Going through the enclosed air passage appealed to him as nothing better than a last resort. With the kind of break he might buy with bursts from the machine pistol, he had a chance of making one of the closed passages.

He set himself, pulling up into a sprinting position. He edged his head to the cover of the blind bulkhead, trying to locate one of the waiting gunmen. A bullet smashed itself into the metal beside his head and he lurched back, knowing he went into the air passage or died here.

One of the red agents ran toward him, angling across the deck, his

gun rattling, orange bursts erupting from its barrel.

Sawyer fired. The agent, struck in the leg and driven half-around in a ballet-like turn, fell back. Eddie Sawyer turned, leaping toward the air passage. His face smashed into a gun barrel.

The air passage turned a brilliant orange and green, alive with glittering stars. Sawyer gagged, falling to the side. Before he could order his arms to lift the machine pistol, the man in the air passage said, "Hold what you got, fellow. Right there."

Sawyer remained still.

The man in the deep shadows said, "I'll take that machine pistol, friend. I'd hate you to get ideas and get yourself shot."

Sawyer handed over the machine pistol, butt first. He scowled, staring at the man in the shadows. "Didn't you hear your master? Kill him on sight. That's me they're talking about."

He heard the man's sharp intake of breath. Suddenly, inexplicably, the machine pistol was thrust back into his hands.

"Sawyer!" The man in the air passage whispered it. He retreated slightly. "You better get in here."

Numbly, Sawyer obeyed, crawling into the space. His question was instinctive, reflex. "Who are you?"

"Call me Frobisher."

"From Department X. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here on orders. I've been

souping this old scow up for the biggest blast you ever saw. I brought the stuff abroad in aluminum crates —"

"Explosives!"

"You better believe it. Reed sent me. I've set her up aft, forward and amidships. When she goes they'll pick up pieces in Finland, part of her in the China seas."

Men were running forward on the deck now. Frobisher retreated into the air passage. But for a moment Sawyer did not move, but sagged, shaken, against the passage bulkhead.

Frobisher was scrambling downward into deeper shadows. He spoke across his shoulder as he crawled away. "We better clear out of here. Reed's orders were to set the charges for thirteen hundred hours."

The agent clambered out into a lower deck passage. "Come on," he said, "we'll go out the way I came aboard."

Frobisher crouched in the passage, gun ready as Sawyer joined him. Sawyer's face was gray. "I can't clear out—not yet."

The agent led the way toward a stateroom along the passageway. "You better. When this old girl goes—"

"Pete Drake's aboard! And Dr. Mountain. I—"

"Sorry, Sawyer. According to Reed this scow's got to go. The charges are set." Running. Frobisher checked his watch. "They

still got a few hours. Maybe they'll make it."

Sawyer followed him into the deserted stateroom, seeing the opened porthole across it.

"Motor boat tied alongside, Sawyer. I'll go out first, get her revved, and then you come through—fast. That first step's a killer, but when you start out, just let go and fall. I'll have her moving by the time you land."

Sawyer was shaking his head, but Frobisher didn't even glance at him. He stepped up on a chair, turned on his back and levered himself headfirst through the porthole.

The agent was half through the porthole when Sawyer heard the gunburst from above them. The agent's body quivered under the impact of the bullets, stiffened.

Eddie Sawyer caught his legs, dragged him back into the stateroom. For an instant, he stared, sickened at the three black holes in Frobisher's forehead.

Sawyer heard a whisper of sound behind him. He clutched up the two guns, lunging hard to the right and trying to turn. He didn't make it.

Something cracked him across the skull, driving him to his knees. He struck hard, but still activated by his last thought, to turn and fire, he twisted his body in agonizing slowness.

He was struck again. This time the impact seemed less. It was as if

he were touched by a feather. He didn't really feel it at all. He felt himself sprawling out face down in incredible slow motion toward the deck, but when he struck there, he didn't feel that, either.

XIII

PETE DRAKE leaped up from the deck where he'd been sitting with arms locked about his knees. Sounds of sporadic gunfire echoed from different parts of the ship. He ran to a porthole, peered through it. He saw a guard, standing armed and wary along the port railing.

While he stood there, the sound of the crane engine ceased abruptly.

Scowling, he turned and spoke across his shoulder to Candy. "I can't sit this out any more. Stay here. Keep the hatch barred. One of us will come back for you."

Taking his time, Drake loosened the handle securing the porthole glass. Watching the guard through it, he eased it out and worked his way, feet first over it.

He struck the floor lightly, bounding back, catlike. The guard heeled around, tilting his gun. But Pete was already around the corner of the bulkhead. The guard followed him. Drake looked around helplessly.

As the Red agent slowed at the corner of the bulkhead, Pete jerked what looked like a ball-point pen from his shirt pocket.

When the guard, easing the gun barrel first, stepped out to confront him, Pete Drake pressed the barrel of the cylinder. A white chemical erupted from it. The guard gasped, slapping at his eyes.

Pete caught up a folded deck chair and brought it down over the guard's head, tearing the canvas and immobilizing the agent in the wings of the chair. Drake swung the big man around, relieving him of his gun as he turned.

Thrusting the chair ahead of him, Pete ran the agent into the railing and by tilting the chair and driving it against the back of the man's head, sent him over the side. Pete retreated to the bulkhead, checking both ways along the deck.

"Ten little Indians," he whispered to himself.

The gunfire below decks had ceased. He moved forward along the bulkhead, but paused, seeing longshoremen scrambling for the ladder, leaving the ship as if it were burning. A strangely ominous silence spread shroud-like over the ship.

Scowling, Drake ran forward again to the open deck amidships. He halted, pressed against the bulkhead. The deck around the open hold was empty, except for one man in gray slacks and wind-breaker. He was armed.

A few inches from his head a cable block was secured to the bulkhead, its lines attached to the superstructure around the hold. He



loosened the knot, held the metal block in his hand. He called. "You. Hey! Psst!"

The guard swung around, gun up. Pete released the cable block, hearing it sing as it swung outward. The guard yelled, tried to duck. He didn't move fast enough. The block caught him, staggering him.

Crouching low, Drake ran out to him, disarmed him and raced back to the protection of the superstructure. For some seconds he remained, back pressed against the bulkhead, listening. The silence seemed to have deepened. There was no longer gunfire, no sounds of running men.

Drake shook his head, mistrusting the silence worse than he had the earlier bark of guns. He inched toward an inner passage aft. Holding his breath, he checked the corridor, its down companionway, its eerie silence.

He stepped over the watertight guard. A gun crackled at the far end of the passage and the man who fired it leaped back to safety down there.

Dropping the guns into his jack-

et pocket, Drake reached up, caught a projecting edge of the roofing and chinned himself up. He caught a guard rail and levered himself over it. As nimbly and silently as a cat, Pete ran aft across the roofing. He didn't pause, only caught a glimpse of the shadow of the crouching guard below him.

The guard heard him and swung around, firing. The shot was wild and there wasn't time for a second. The guard was hunkered beside the passage hatch and before he could set himself, Pete Drake pounced upon him, bearing him to the deck. He took the man's gun.

"You won't be needing this," he said. "I don't like leaving them lying around, you know."

He stood up, but had to reach out to steady himself against a bulkhead. He jerked his head around, seeing the wharves and warehouses slowly receding from him. The lines had been cast off. The huge merchant ship, anchor up, drifted.

Hooting tug whistles brought Pete heeling around again. The small boats were edging along side the big merchantman. He turned all the way around in the ominous quiet. Suddenly the diesel engines of the huge freighter came alive, low, and the *Harmer* was being turned outward toward the mouth of the harbor.

He ran aft, going into the passage that led to the stateroom, where he'd been left prisoner with Candy.

He slowed, even before he reached the stateroom. Sick, he saw the hatch hanging open, broken. He didn't need to, but he looked inside the empty stateroom. Candy was gone.

XIV

THE MOVEMENT of the silent ship, the idling of its engines, the efforts of the tugs, the slap of the bay upon the hull—only these things had meaning for the moment. Otherwise, Pete Drake had the upsetting sense of being alone.

Caution forgotten, Pete ran through the passages, checking every stateroom. He kept his hand on the firing mechanism of the machine pistol, but he was searching now and he moved rapidly and not warily.

He raced below decks, for a moment stared at the engineers in the engine room checking gauges and pressures. He heeled and ran. He was not confronted anywhere. At each passage opening he checked open decks, boat housing, superstructure. No one barred his way.

Distracted now, his eyes wild, Drake covered the lower decks. The hatch to the captain's quarters swung open. The ward room stood empty, as did the mess and the galley.

The cable block he'd loosed swung slowly with the movement of the ship across the open deck.

He moved upward on a ladder to the bridge. There had to be a helmsman.

At the top of the companion-way, he paused, glancing across his shoulder. The tugs were slipping away behind him as if carried on the wind, riding the gray spume of the ship's wake. In the distance, red buildings and black roofs of Baltimore were framed against the overcast sky.

He kept low, padding across the short deck to the bridge. He caught the hatch handle, jerked it open.

Violence, blood and destruction struck him with numbing impact. For the space of a breath he did not move at all. Leahey, the radio man, lay sprawled on the deck before him, head bloodied, clothing mangled. He was unconscious.

At the helm, the captain appeared only slightly better off than Leahey. He was conscious. He stood at the wheel with a fierce dignity that refused to acknowledge a gashed skull, bruised face and bloodied clothing.

Taut, Drake heeled around at the same instant the hatch was slapped shut. Dr. Swain and a gray-clad agent stood against the bulkhead. Both were armed.

But while the guard appeared cold and professional with his gun held ready, Swain was visibly shaken. His face and clothing were sodden with sweat. His graying hair was plastered wildly upon his high forehead. The gun in his

hand was almost useless, because his hands shook violently.

Pete Drake winced, withdrawing his gaze from Swain's distended eyes. The bulky professor was on the verge of hysteria, his eyes glittered mindlessly.

"Do you feel that you've accomplished a great deal, Drake?" His voice quivered with uncontrollable rage.

"If we've stopped you, I do," Pete said tentatively.

Swain's raging laughter had agony beneath it. "Oh, let's say you've delayed me! But I can't thing what it's going to buy you personally!"

Pete Drake shrugged, watching him. "I wasn't in it for profit, Doctor."

Swain took a step forward, barely able to control himself. "Yes. You with your bungling, meddling stupidity. You've wrecked this moment." He waved a sheet of paper. "Your latest communique from Reed. He reports time-controlled explosives set hidden through this ship. We couldn't find them. We don't have time for that—and even one explosion would bring too much attention on this operation. It's off. Finished. Over."

"Would you permit me one small hooray?" Pete said.

Swain laughed, raging. "Only this operation is finished, Drake. This operation, this ship—and you and your friends. All lifeboats but

one have been scuttled, life-saving gear destroyed, radio and phone demolished. You have no way of getting in touch with anybody off this ship once Behan and I leave. You have time to contemplate your own destruction, my meddling friend."

Pete Drake nodded. And meantime, you return to your classrooms and dream up new horrors?"

"I shall make a second attempt, but you and your friends won't be around to witness it," Swain said. He jerked his head toward his agent. "Behan, disarm him."

Behan stepped forward, relieved Drake of the machine pistol and of the guns in his jacket pockets.

Pete watched Swain. "Where are Sawyer and Candace?"

Swain's attempted smile of triumph more resembled a grimace of agony. "You'll see them, believe me. Don't worry. While our gallant captain sails his ship to sea at fifteen knots per hour—running to spare the harbor the fire and devastation of his exploding ship—I'll see that you join your busy body friends for the rest of your last voyage."

Behan prodded Pete Drake. He turned, crossed the wheelroom. Swain opened the hatch, preceded them out and down the ladder to the deck amidships.

Swain's voice shook as he spoke across his shoulder, jerking his

head toward the open hold. "You passed your friends, Mr. Drake. On your way to find me."

Pete paused near Swain, feeling the bite of a gun snout on his spine. He stared down into the hold. Vaguely in that suffocating dark he saw Eddie Sawyer and Candy dangling on cable lines a few feet above the virulent bone meal.

"If they don't suffocate, aren't overcome by fumes down there," Swain said, "they'll live long enough with you to be blown apart with this ship."

Swain stepped away from him. He raised his voice, shouting names, waiting. Nothing happened.

Pete Drake said, "If you're calling your boys, Swain, I'm afraid I left them indisposed. You and Behan are the only ones left."

Swain laughed, raging. "Then we're enough. Push him in there with his friends, Behan, and let's get out of here."

Something like a cloud seemed to flood across Drake's brain, blotting out all reason. In the dark well of that hold, Eddie and Candy swung helplessly. In seconds he would join them. Beside him, Swain was about to walk away from the havoc he'd created—and he'd live to try again.

It was this more than anything else that erupted in Pete's mind, driving out the fact of the gun at his spine. He was going to die anyway. He had no chance left to stay

alive—but he didn't have to die alone.

He yelled suddenly a banshee wail. He lunged toward Swain, grabbing him about the waist and wrestling him to the deck. Swain, seeing himself taken toward the gaping mouth of the hold, screamed mindlessly, the sound ripping out of him, sick with terror.

Behan bounded toward them, gun lifted, but unable to fire because Pete was shielded by Swain's bulk.

Pete thrust his hips and legs upward, sending Swain's heavy body over his head. Screaming, Swain clutched wildly at the edge of the hold, lost his grip and plunged downward into the well.

Still carried by his own momentum toward the hold, Pete Drake caught at the framing, breaking his fall. He lay there a moment and then turned, staring up into the dark, chilled face of the armed agent.

He saw the gun quiver slightly, fixed on him. Below him he heard Swain's screams, pleading with Behan to save him. All Drake could think was that Behan could not miss at this close range.

A gun fired. The crack of it reverberated through Drake's body and Behan was staggering, falling past him into the hold, driven forward by the impact of the bullet in his back, before Pete realized Behan had not fired his gun at all.

Drake shoved away from the

brink of the hold, remaining on his knees on the deck. Eyes wide, he stated at the bloody form of Leahey crouched, gun in hand, on the ladder from the bridge.

The radio man stayed there for some moments. Their gazes held. Neither of them spoke. Then Leahey crossed the deck unsteadily.

Pete pulled himself to his feet. "Dr. Mountain and Sawyer. Let's get them out of there."

Leahey nodded. Both of them manned the winches and they reeled Candy and Eddie Sawyer to the deck. For some moments then, the four of them sprawled on the gently heaving deck, breathing deeply, grateful simply to be alive.

Sawyer said, "Leahey, can you contact shore?"

"Everything's smashed," Pete said. "We'll just have to ride it out."

"Charges are set for thirteen hundred hours," Sawyer said.

Drake caught his breath. "We've less than one hour."

Leahey said, "I can repair the wireless enough to use it. Anything that simple is hard to destroy beyond use."

Sawyer stood up. "Then do it. When you contact Department X, just say we cannot reach rendezvous point. Give them our bearing. Just keep giving it to them."

Leahey nodded. He walked slowly across the deck, going to the radio shack.

"There are men in the engine rooms," Pete said.

Sawyer nodded. "Get them out of there. Get them up on deck."

Drake went down the nearest hatchway, on the run toward the engine rooms.

Sawyer climbed the ladder to the bridge. He found the bloodied captain at the wheel. He said, "I'll take over, Captain. There's one lifeboat that's seaworthy. Get Leahey, the engineers, Dr. Mountain and Pete Drake aboard her and get as far away from this ship as you can."

The captain relinquished the wheel. When he hesitated, Sawyer's voice lashed him. "There's no time to waste, Captain. You've had enough. Get those people together and clear out of here."

The captain met his gaze. He said, "I admire you, Sawyer. I say with pride that I'm thankful I could do a small part."

"Write me a letter," Sawyer said. But then he grinned. "Thanks, Captain. . . . So long."

The bloodied man gave him a small salute and left the bridge.

Sawyer held the wheel, watching the compass. He lifted his gaze, seeing the gray, open sea ahead of him. He tried to ignore it, but his gaze jerked to his wrist watch. Time had hurtled past.

The hatch behind him opened.

Sawyer jerked his head around. His gaze met Pete's. "Leahey kept sending the message until I called

him out to the lifeboat. They're on it. All of them."

"Then you get down there with them," Eddie said. "That's an order."

"It's too late," Pete said. "They're adrift."

Sawyer exhaled heavily. For some moments there was silence on the bridge, and a brooding stillness over the whole waiting ship. Involuntarily, Eddie checked his watch. "Funny how fast time passes when you don't want it to," he said.

Pete Drake nodded. He stared through the great windshields, spotted with raindrops. "It's starting to rain."

"Great for the crops," Sawyer said.

"It's no good," Pete said as though reading his thoughts. "I couldn't swim that far."

They did not speak again. There seemed nothing left to say. The sky was leaden, the sea churned and the rain belw in like a velvet curtain.

Suddenly, Sawyer straightened. "What's that?"

Pete scowled, listening.

Eddie Sawyer ran out on the open superstructure. "Pete!" he yelled. "It's the helicopter!"

The huge 'copter hovered above the bridge, its ladder reeling out, swiftly, and yet seeming painfully slowly.

"Eddie!" Pete shouted again. He leaped up, catching the ladder

and clambering up it as Sawyer ran out of the wheel room.

The helicopter pilot shouted frantically down at them. Eddie Sawyer could not hear him. He did not need to. The single important fact was in all their minds.

Time had run out.

Sawyer lunged at the ladder, grasping it. Above him, he saw Pete scrambling into the 'copter cockpit.

Pete Drake turned up there, leaning downward, reaching out his arm. The pilot waved his hand, signalling something and abruptly the helicopter lurched, peeling away on the wind.

Eddie Sawyer felt as if his arms had been torn from their shoulder sockets. His feet left the deck and

for a moment he hung there, suspended in space.

The first explosion tore away the stern of the big freighter. The concussion flailed upward, shaking Sawyer like a leaf at the end of the ladder. His sweated hands slipped.

Frantic, he stared up. He could see only Pete's face up there, fixed on his.

He let go with one hand and strained upward, twisting the rope about his wrist. Below him the second explosion erupted in the thunder of the first and the ship was blown apart midships. Sawyer clung to the ladder, his legs dangling wildly. The helicopter lurched upward again, racing away from the brilliant orange flames of the burning ship.

Complete in the Next Issue

THE DRAMATIC LIVES OF BONNIE AND CLYDE

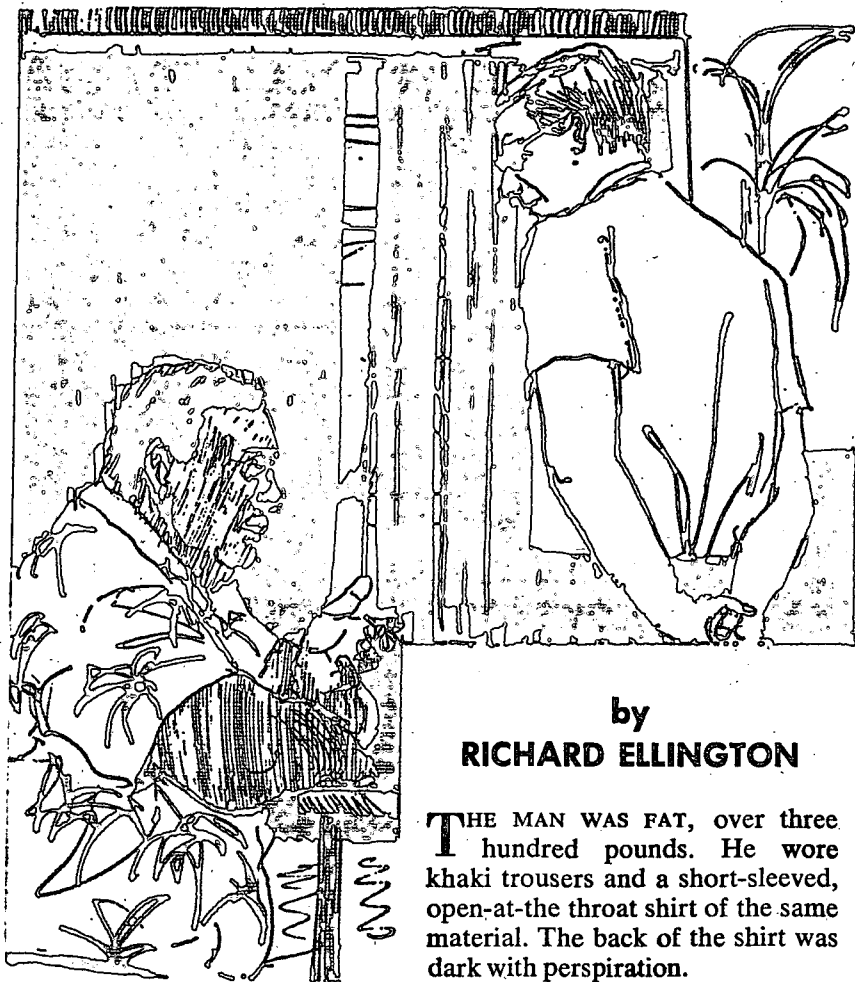
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"Good-by, Cora"

Outside, a hunted man waited for his end. Inside, a man without hope made his last desperate gamble with Fate . . .



by

RICHARD ELLINGTON

THE MAN WAS FAT, over three hundred pounds. He wore khaki trousers and a short-sleeved, open-at-the-throat shirt of the same material. The back of the shirt was dark with perspiration.

He leaned forward on the bench, put his elbows on the table, and said in a worried voice, "You don't look so good. What's the matter, Carter? You sick, man?" His accent was faintly West Indian.

Carter sat down slowly on a bench across the table. He was tall and lean and his shoulders were slightly stooped. His tanned face was heavily lined. He wore a flowered sports shirt, white linen slacks, and a wide-brimmed, expensive Panama hat. He took off the Panama, put it on the bench beside him, and nodded.

"I've been drunk for three days. This morning I got your message and decided I'd better come out of it. It's not easy."

He drew cigarettes from the pocket of his sports shirt and lit one with trembling fingers. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He dabbed at it with a handkerchief and grinned painfully.

"I'm a damned fool, Tommy. I always think it'll help but it never does."

"Man, you need a drink."

Carter shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm through. I'll just sweat it out."

"Not even champagne?"

"Not even champagne."

Behind them, a juke box came to life. A native woman came out of the pavilion, carrying a tray with two glasses and a bottle of champagne on it. She crossed the open cement terrace and put the

glasses and champagne on the table.

The woman went back into the pavilion. The fat man picked up the bottle of champagne and looked questioningly at Carter. "You sure you won't change your mind?"

"I'm sure, Tommy."

"You don't care if I indulge?"

"Hell, no."

Tommy poured champagne into one of the glasses. He picked it up, made a little gesture toward Carter, and said, "Well, first today." He drank half a glassful of the champagne and put the glass down on the table in front of him.

Carter watched him, and more sweat crept onto his forehead. He inhaled his cigarette and blew smoke upward. A light breeze trailed it off toward the water. Carter followed the smoke with his eyes and let them come to rest on the town of Charlotte Amalie across the bay. The juke box stopped moaning, and the faint tooting of automobile horns floated across the harbor. Otherwise it was quiet and still.

Tommy leaned forward again with his elbows on the table.

"What's the matter, Carter?" he asked in a gently worried voice.

Carter kept his eyes on the town. His mouth tightened and one of his face muscles jerked. He said in a low, tight voice, "Cora's not coming back, Tommy. She's left me."

Tommy sank back on the bench

and stared at Carter. He said softly, "What?"

Carter still studied the town across the bay. He squinted his eyes as if trying to see it better. Very slowly he took a deep breath and said, "She—she means everything to me, everything. Without her—"

He stopped talking and shook his head. The muscle of his cheek jumped again.

Amazement came over the fat man's face. "But hell, man! After all these years."

Carter said dully, "Twenty-two."

"But I don't understand. What happened?"

"I don't know exactly. I've been noticing a change in her for the last year or so, and I had a funny feeling about things when she went up to visit her sister in the States last month. She wrote a couple of times, sort of half-interest letters. And then this one came four days ago. She just said it was all over."

"Is there another man?"

"I don't think so. No, I guess she just got tired of it. All this." Carter gestured wearily toward the town. "The boat, the heat, the drinking, the people, the tropics, and me. Mostly, I guess, it was me. She never understood about me, and she never understood about the Islands. I don't think she ever knew or cared how much I loved her, how much I depended on her." Carter's voice was tightening. He stopped

talking and squinted his eyes hard again.

Tommy said uncomfortably. "Maybe if I wrote to her—"

Carter shook his head. "No, it wouldn't do any good. I know Cora. Once she makes up her mind, she'll stick to it."

Tommy studied Carter's lean face for several seconds. Then he said in a gently husky voice, "I'm sorry, Carter."

"Yeah."

"You'll get used to it in time."

"Uh uh." Carter shook his head again. "No, I won't get used to it, but I'll try to live with it." He took a long pull on his cigarette. He still kept his eyes on the distant town across the harbor. He went on talking in a low strained voice.

"You don't understand, Tommy. If she had left me after a month or even a year or two years, it wouldn't have mattered so much. I wouldn't have known her so well then or loved her so much. It—it's like losing your arms or your legs or your eyes."

Tommy said kindly, "People lose those things every day, Carter, and they go on and make the best of it."

Carter stopped looking at the town across the bay. He swung his bloodshot eyes back on the fat man.

"Not all of them," he said. "Not the ones like me. The others have something I don't have. Maybe it's character or strength or just plain

guts. I don't know. Maybe that's why Cora left me. I wasn't ever what she really wanted anyway. She really wanted security, a husband who had a steady job, and a home in the suburbs of some city up north. But I was picturesque when she met me. Picturesque!"

He laughed a short, bitter little laugh. "You're not picturesque any longer when you're no better than a beachcombing bum at forty-five."

"You're no beachcomber."

Carter didn't seem to hear him. The bloodshot eyes were looking through the fat man now, looking at something a long way off. He went on talking in the same low voice.

"Mostly I guess it's the memories," he said, "all those days and all those nights, and all the arguments and fights, and all the wonderful times we had together. I remember every second of it. And then there were the war years. Remember how it was here in St. Thomas during the war?"

"Sure, Carter, I remember." The fat man's voice was uneasy now.

Carter continued. "These last three days have been hell, Tommy, hell. I never left the boat and I saw her everywhere, some dresses hanging over a bunk, that old robe I know so well, some hairpins and powder in a drawer. I tell you, Tommy, I—"

"Stop it, Carter!" The fat man's

deep voice was sharp, almost angry.

Carter had half-risen from the bench with both hands flat on the table in front of him. He stayed that way for nearly five seconds, and for the first time in several minutes he seemed to see the other man again. Finally he sank slowly down on the bench.

He lit another cigarette, took a deep breath and said evenly, "Sure, Tommy. I almost forgot you sent me that message. What did you want to see me about?"

The fat man watched him anxiously for several seconds, then the look of embarrassed sympathy on his face was replaced by a worried frown. He leaned toward Carter and lowered his voice.

"It's Greg. Some men are going to kill him."

The impact of the fat man's words stopped Carter's train of thought completely. He stared for a second or two at his friend and then said in an incredulous voice, "Kill him?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Carter asked. "What's Greg done?"

"I don't know the whole story. It happened in the States. That's why he came back here to St. Thomas a month ago. You knew he was back?"

Carter shook his head. "No, I didn't know it. I had no idea he was in St. Thomas."

"I guess nobody knows it but

Mom and me and—these men who are going to kill him.”

“They know he’s here on the Island?”

“Yes. When Greg got here last month I could tell right away that something was wrong. He wouldn’t go out and didn’t want to see anybody. He told Mom he was sick but I knew better. I finally got it out of him. He didn’t tell me what he’d done, but he said these men would send a professional killer after him if they knew where he’d gone. I think he got mixed up with a crime syndicate. Maybe he double-crossed them in some way, or maybe he got paid for something he couldn’t deliver.”

“He’s out at your mother’s place?”

“Yes.” The fat man finished his champagne and refilled the glass. He stared down at the drink and said bitterly, “Greg’s a no-good louse, but you know that Mom thinks he’s Jesus’ own shadow. She worships him. It’d kill her if she found out the truth, if anything happened to Greg.”

He stopped talking, sipped his champagne, and then added, “And, after all, he *is* my kid brother. I’ve got to save him, Carter. That’s why I sent for you. I thought maybe you could think of something, help me.”

Carter nodded his head slowly. A thoughtful frown came over his lined face and he said, “Your mother is the nicest person I’ve

known. She took me in when my own parents were drowned. She raised me and tried to send me to college only I wouldn’t listen to her. She gave me every chance she gave you and Greg. You know and I know that she’s like my own mother. I owe her a lot, Tommy, an awful lot.”

“Then for God’s sake help me, man.”

“When those boys send a killer to do a job he usually does it.”

“Yes, I know. But there must be some way.”

“You said they knew Greg was here in St. Thomas. What makes you think so?”

Tommy took his fat elbows off the table and straightened himself on the bench. “A private plane from Miami landed at the airport last night. There were two men aboard. One was the pilot; the other man didn’t look like a wealthy businessman or a tourist. They each carried one small suitcase and they registered at the Grand Hotel. The pilot gave his name as William Leary and the other man signed in as Ancil Dolph.”

Carter shrugged his shoulders. “Hell, that may not mean anything. They could be here for a dozen reasons.”

The fat man shook his head and wiped perspiration off his forehead with a handkerchief. “I’ve had a good check on the airport ever since Greg told me about his trouble. These men asked in the coffee

shop where Gregory Braun could be reached. The counter boy said he didn't know, said he'd never heard of him. I don't think they did any more inquiring."

Tommy glanced at his wrist watch. "They were still in their room at the Grand half an hour ago." He picked up his glass of champagne and drank it.

Carter spoke slowly in a tired voice. "I guess the police are out."

"I guess they are."

"No chance of just keeping Greg hidden until these fellows give up and go away?"

"What do you think?"

A slight annoyance crept over Carter's face. "You know I'd like to help, Tommy. But just what the hell can I do? What did you think I could do?"

The fat man spread his hands helplessly.

"I don't know," he said, "I just thought that maybe—well, that you'd know about these things, know what to do."

Carter lit another cigarette. Smoke trailed out of his nose. Finally, he said, "I ran rum and whiskey in twenty-nine and thirty. Today I'll run brandy if the price is right. I've made my share of petty payoffs, and I was on a party once with Al Capone. I've thrown shots twice and never hit anything. Once I took a slug in the shoulders and had an all-night swim for my trouble. That was a long time ago. No, Tommy, these boys today are

way out of my class. I don't see how I can help."

Disappointment showed in the fat man's kin eyes.

"Well," he said, "I guess that's that." He mopped his face again. "Maybe Greg can make a run for it again."

Carter turned and looked out across the bay. A large white yacht was unfurling her sails and moving slowly across the harbor toward the open sea. He watched it without really seeing it.

"It won't do any good," he said. "If they want him, they'll find him."

"Yeah," Tommy said, "I guess they will. Poor man." He poured more champagne in the glass and drank it. He looked at Carter and said, in the same soft voice he'd used earlier, "I'm sorry as hell about Cora."

Carter nodded without looking at him. His eyes were still on the red roofs of the town. They stayed there for ten more seconds. Then very slowly he turned and looked at Tommy. His tired, bloodshot eyes had sudden inspiration in them. The faint trace of a smile played around his lips.

He said, "I wonder—" There was a pause.

The fat man frowned and asked, "You wonder what?"

"If it's possible." The smile spread a little.

"What? Something about Cora?"

"No. Cora's finished, but Greg may not be."

"I don't understand."

Carter stood up. The smile had gone from his face but there was still a hint of excitement in his eyes. "I just had an idea. If it's any good, maybe we can save Greg after all."

"How? What are you going to do?"

"First, I've got to find out if it'll work. You'll hear from me if it does. Just keep Greg out of the way and don't tell him anything about any of this."

"All right. But don't you need help?"

"No." Carter picked up his Panama and put it on. He held out his hand. "Sit tight until you hear from me."

The fat man nodded uneasily and they shook hands. Carter crossed the terrace, went through the pavilion and out to the road leading to the airport. An empty cab was just passing. He flagged it down, got in, and told the driver to take him to the Grand Hotel. The driver nodded, and the car jerked forward.

The road led around the bay and into Cha Cha Town, the old French quarter of Charlotte Amalie. The cab swung around a corner and the Normandie Bar came into view. Carter looked at the Normandie, shrugged wearily, and said aloud. "The hell with it."

The driver slowed the car and half-turned in his seat.

"What?" he asked.

Carter told him to stop and wait



for him. He got out of the cab, entered the Normandie Bar, and ordered a double shot of rum.

The bartender said, "Hello, Carter," but Carter didn't hear him.

As he held the rum in his hand, he was thinking of other times in the Normandie Bar, other times when she had been with him. There was that night during the war when the big Marine made the pass at her. He looked down at his knuckles. The scars were still there. Later that night she'd laid her head on his shoulder and cried and told him how much she loved him.

Carter lifted his glass, closed his eyes, drank the double shot of rum in one gulp. Then he paid for the drink and returned to the waiting cab. They passed the ancient walled cemetery, circled the market, and finally reached the square at the end of Charlotte Amalie's main street.

It was a boat day and one of the bigger cruise ships was in port. Crowds of eager-eyed, pale tourists

filled the sidewalks, gawking, taking pictures and shopping. When Carter's cab reached the Post Office, he told the driver to circle the square and stop near the steps of the Grand Hotel. The driver was lucky enough to find a parking place.

Carter got out, paid his fare, and then asked the driver if he wanted to earn ten dollars. The driver's eyes said he did. Carter told him to wait.

The Grand Hotel is one of the oldest in the West Indies, a large rambling building that covers half a block. Various shops and offices line the ground floor, and the lobby is up one flight of worn steps. Carter went up the stairs and entered the big shadowy room.

The rum had sent a pleasant warm glow through him. Now, as the ten-degree cooler temperature of the lobby hit him, the drink began to take effect. Coming on an empty stomach, it gave him a feeling of remote numbness. His nerves suddenly seemed to relax and he noticed that he'd stopped perspiring.

He stopped at the desk and coughed. The dozing clerk opened his eyes, yawned, and stood up. Carter asked him if Mr. Dolph and Mr. Leary were still in their room. The clerk looked at the row of mail boxes, nodded and gave Carter the number of the room.

Carter thanked him and asked if he sold stamps. The clerk

yawned and nodded again. Carter bought two stamps, an airmail and a five cent.

There were two writing desks in the lobby. Carter crossed over to one of them, sat down, and hurriedly wrote two notes. He put them in envelopes, sealed them, and put the air mail stamp on one and the five cent stamp on the other.

Then he went down the steps to the street.

The taxi was still waiting for him. He took ten dollars from his pocket and handed it to the driver. Then he gave him the two letters he'd written.

"Now listen carefully," he said. The driver put on a frown of concentration. Carter spoke very slowly.

The driver repeated the instructions. It satisfied Carter. He went up the steps to the lobby of the hotel, walked the length of it, and entered a dim, musty corridor. Rooms opened off each side of it, and all the doors were closed.

At the end of the long hallway Carter turned to the right, climbed a flight of stairs, and found the number he was looking for. He stopped in front of the door, listened a second, and knocked. There was a pause, and then from inside the room a hoarse voice with a Brooklyn accent said, "Yeah? Who is it?"

Carter said very distinctly, "It's Gregory Braun." Nothing hap-

pened for nearly five seconds, and then the door swung open.

A heavy set, stocky man with thick, black hair and a swarthy face stood framed in the doorway. His eyes were hard and expressionless. He wore only his underwear and he held a towel in his hand. There was a trace of shaving soap under his left ear.

Behind him Carter saw a slim, blond young man sitting on the edge of the bed. He was fully dressed except for one shoe. He held the shoe in his hand and stared at Carter. His silky hair was thinning at the front and he wore glasses. He said nothing.

The stocky man squinted, looked up at Carter, and said, "What did you say your name was?"

"Gregory Braun."

"So?"

"I heard you were asking where to find me, out at the airport last night. I wondered why."

A sneer spread over the swarthy face and the stocky man's head tilted several degrees to one side. His voice had velvet wrapped around it. "Don't you know?"

Carter's lean body seemed to sag a little. He nodded and said in a tired voice, "Yeah, I guess I do."

The dark man stepped aside and motioned Carter into the room with his head. Carter moved through the doorway. Behind him he heard the door close. He moved on toward the only chair in the room. When he was still four feet

from it, the man behind him said, "Far enough! Freeze it right there." Carter stopped and stared at the wall in front of him. "Wash him, Bill."

The thin blond put his shoe on and got up off the bed. He went over to Carter and quickly searched him.

"He's clean," he said. He had a friendly voice with no particularly accent. He went back and sat down on the edge of the bed again.

"Okay," the stocky man said. "You can relax, Braun."

Carter turned around. The stocky man had a forty-five automatic in his hand. He let it hang loosely at his side.

The blond man laughed and shook his head. "You're sure making it easy, Buster."

Carter looked bleakly at him. "I got tired of running." He shifted his eyes to the other man. "Can I square it?"

"Not with us. We've already been paid to do a job."

The blond man said almost absently, "I fly planes, Ancil. Remember?"

"I don't mean you guys," Carter said. "I mean the boys up north. Can I square it with them?"

Ancil shrugged. "It musta been a big chunk, very big."

"It was," Carter said, "and I've still got it."

Ancil's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Not on you."

"Hell, no."

"But you can lay hands on it?"

"Yes. I'll give it back to them if they'll forget it."

Ancil looked at the blond. "What do you think, Bill?"

"We might give it a whirl. Everybody likes to get their money back."

"Right." Ancil turned his eyes on Carter again. "Okay, Braun, where is it?"

"Hidden on a boat I've been living on."

"Where's the boat?"

"It's anchored out at Nazareth Bay at the other end of the Island."

"You got a car?"

"No, we'll have to rent one or hire a cab."

Ancil turned to the blond. "Go hire a car, Bill."

Bill looked surprised. "Hell," he said, "we haven't even had breakfast yet."

"To hell with breakfast. I'm thinking about dinner tonight—in Brooklyn. Go hire a car."

Bill got up reluctantly, crossed to the door and went out. Ancil started putting on his clothes, and Carter sat down on the only chair in the room.

It wasn't a long ride, but it seemed to Carter as if it would last forever. Bill did the driving and Carter sat beside him on the front seat. Ancil sat in the rear. He'd removed his coat, opened his vest, and rolled up his sleeves. The coat lay loosely across his knees and Carter knew the forty-five was un-

der it. There was little conversation, but once when a speeding taxi narrowly missed them, Bill grunted angrily, "God damn this driving on the left."

Ancil said, "Yeah." Otherwise they rode in silence.

Carter sat stiffly and watched the town drop away beneath them as they circled upward on the Red Hook road. He let his eyes run lingeringly over the familiar scenes below. The boats in the harbor looked like toys, and the still, blue water resembled glass. People on the streets were moving specks, and cars were no bigger than crawling ants.

The car reached the summit of the mountain and dropped off sharply in the direction of St. John. The low, deep moan of an incoming freighter sounded faintly above the motor of the car as the town disappeared from sight.

Occasionally the car passed dilapidated shacks with their strangely contrasting profusion of tropical plants and flowers. There was no traffic; and except for wandering goats and cows, they had the winding road to themselves.

Five more minutes passed and the entrance to a dirt road came into view ahead of them. Carter indicated it with his head.

Bill slowed, swung the car into the deep ruts, and they crawled upward through deep jungle-like growth. The road levelled off when they reached the top of the hill and

far below a wide panorama of islands stretched out before them.

Three miles away, directly in front of them, the bright, green mountains of St. John rose majestically toward the sky. White beaches lined the water's edge and sparkled brightly in the hot morning sun.

Ancil said, "How much further is it?"

"Another mile or so," Carter told him.

"The bay is just beyond the end of the road."

Ancil's voice became a growl. "You mean we got a walk ahead of us?"

"Yes," Carter said, but he wasn't really listening. He was thinking about the beaches of St. John. His eyes were closed and he was remembering moonlight nights, the feel of hot sand against his back, the gentle roll of a boat riding at anchor, and, most of all, about Cora.

The bumpy, dirt road ended on a bluff a couple of hundred feet above the water. The three men left the car and walked down a path until they came out on the beach. There was very little breeze and it was hot. All three were sweating profusely. The bay was ringed with palms and sea-grapes, and the white beach lay like a ribbon in front of them. The beach on the sand.

About three hundred feet out in the bay a two-masted sixty-foot



motor sailor rode at anchor. Otherwise there was no sign of human habitation. The only sound was the occasional cry of a sea gull and the gentle slap of water on the beach.

Ancil pointed to the boat. "Is that it?"

"Yes." Carter indicated the dinghy. "We'll have to row out."

Bill and Carter dragged the dinghy down to the water and the three men got in. Bill sat in the bow. Carter did the rowing, and Ancil sat in the stern, facing Carter. He took his heavy automatic out of his pocket and held it on his knees.

When they reached the boat, Bill got out first and climbed aboard. Ancil handed him the automatic and went up the ladder. Once on deck he took the pistol again and covered Carter as he climbed aboard and made the dinghy fast. Carter led the way through a companionway, and they entered a large, roomy cabin. It was musty

and dimly lit. Dirty dishes filled the small sink in the galley and there were three or four empty whisky bottles scattered around.

A woman's dress hung on a hanger just inside the companion-way leading forward. The door to the head was open, and it swung lazily back and forth with the even roll of the boat. An open letter and envelope lay on the deck near a small secured table with drawers in it.

Ancil motioned vaguely with his automatic. "Okay, Braun. Where's the dough?"

Carter's bloodshot eyes seemed to stare through Ancil. He seemed to be looking at something a long way off.

"It's there in the drawer," he said. He turned and took two steps toward the table with the drawers in it. Ancil lifted his automatic and squeezed the trigger. The pistol roared and jumped in his hand. The bullet hit Carter just left of center in the middle of his back. The impact knocked him forward against the bulkhead. He hit it hard face-on, with both arms outstretched. His knees buckled, and he slid down into a kneeling position. It was as if he were praying to the bulkhead.

He made no sound and he stayed in the bent-over kneeling position for five or six seconds. A dark stain of blood was spreading over the back of the flowered sports shirt. It spread incredibly fast. A little

gurgling noise came from his mouth and he toppled sideways onto the deck. He didn't move again.

The thin blond man's face had turned the color of cigar ash. He stared at the man on the floor and said, "Hell, Ancil!"

Nothing had happened to Ancil's face. He glanced in surprise at his companion, and then jerked his head toward the small table. "See if there's any dough in there."

Bill nodded and walked stiff-legged to the table with his eyes still fixed on Carter's body. There were three drawers. He opened all of them and looked inside. He shook his head. "Nothing in here but this." His hand came out of the top drawer with a small thirty-two revolver.

Ancil made a snorting sound. "A wise guy, huh! Figured to come up shootin', huh!"

Bill slipped the catch on the pistol and flipped the chamber out. He looked at it and shook his head. "Yeah, dumb jerk. This thing isn't even loaded!"

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped the pistol carefully, and put it back in the drawer. He closed the drawer and wiped off all three handles. He looked bewildered and a little sick. When he spoke, there was a tremble in his voice.

"I don't get it, Ancil. What was he trying to pull? That talk about the money and—"

"Hell," Ancil sneered, "the slob was just stalling, that's all."

"You mean you knew it and let him bring us all the way out here?"

"Can you think of a better place?"

Bill stared dumbly at Ancil and shook his head. "What did he do, Ancil? What got him in bad?"

Ancil shrugged. "How the hell would I know? I never seen the guy before. When Beals wants a job done, he don't believe in sending an old pal to do it. He figures they might get to cutting up old capers and neglect business." He ran his eyes around the cabin in a business-like manner. "Can you run this tub?"

Bill said, "Yeah, I guess so."

"Good. Let's haul the anchor and get sloggin'."

Bill looked surprised. "Why? Where to?"

Ancil pointed a stubby finger at the dead man on the deck. "Straight out to sea for a couple of miles, and back here again. The sharks ought to go for all that blood."

"Oh," Bill said.

Ancil grinned. "I wish to God they was all this easy. Brownsville was never like this."

He looked at his wrist watch.

"By God," he said, "if we move fast enough, I can watch the Mets lick the Giants at Shea Stadium tonight."

The next morning Tommy Braun received a letter. It read as follows:

Dear Tommy: Everything worked out okay. Greg is squared and the lead throwers are leaving the Island. They'll be gone by the time you receive this letter. Just make sure Greg sticks around and behaves himself. As for me, I'm leaving the islands. I guess you know why. Don't yet know where I'm going but I have a hunch I'll be okay. Don't worry about the boat. She was mortgaged to the hilt so I'm just leaving it for Kempers to take over. I don't have anything else so I'll be traveling light. Take care of yourself and give your mother my love. Carter.

Two days later a woman in Reading, Pennsylvania, also received a letter. She was sitting on the front porch of her sister's home when the mailman brought it. Her sister was sitting in a swing beside her. The woman tore the letter open and read it. When she finished, she smiled and shook her head. Her sister said, "From Carter?"

"Yes," the woman said. "He hasn't changed any."

"What did he say?"

"Not much. He'll miss me but he'll get along all right. He's going to try his luck in South America."

"Didn't he say anything else?"

The woman looked down at the open letter again. Then she started absently tearing it into small pieces.

"Yes," she replied, "He said, 'Good-by, Cora.'"

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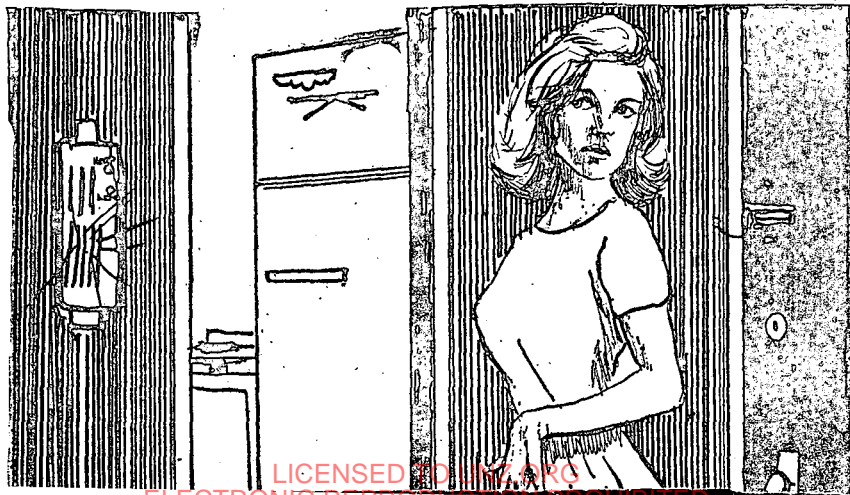
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*Listening, horrified, she suddenly
learned the truth. Murder was her
close neighbor—and she was next!*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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Everything was fine in the old apartment, until it was sold and she had to move. Two years here and nothing was right. The elevator broke down periodically. But she lived on the ground floor, thank goodness. The superintendent was slow collecting trash and he didn't shovel the walks well. She couldn't get her screens down in the summer. The heat was slow. Part of a front step was broken off. And now the intercom.

"What more can go wrong?" she asked aloud, staring at the ceiling which she noticed was developing a new crack.

It was all the intercom. It had been acting up for months, buzzing and whining. She first noticed when she heard a man's voice say, "Come right up." It startled her, because, of course, there was no man in her apartment. Then she realized the voice came from the intercom unit on the wall by the door. She found that it amplified people talking from other apartments to the outside door.

One day, while she was pushing the buttons, she discovered that if she pushed the "hear" button, sounds from the apartment above her were amplified.

And now she was involved in a murder.

"I should have reported it," she said angrily to herself. But she hadn't. Repairing the intercom would involve a lot of work and she disliked the idea of a work-

man in her apartment. Anyway since she lived downstairs all she had to do was look out her door to see who was at the front door. She didn't need the intercom.

If she were to admit truthfully why she didn't report the intercom for repairs it was because a maiden lady with little to do needs occasional diversion. She'd find herself walking over to listen at the unit when it made a noise that attracted her attention or when she didn't have anything else to do.

It had been embarrassing at first, she recalled, being able to listen to someone she didn't know. If they were friends it wouldn't have mattered. She sighed, "If they were friends I wouldn't be in this predicament."

All she really knew was that for six months the name on the mailbox for the apartment above her said *J.B. Carroll*. He seemed to live alone, although he had a lady friend who came often.

She enlarged her picture of J.B. Carroll with the peephole. If the intercom wasn't interesting she sometimes watched through the peephole in her door, which gave her a magnified view of the hall and mailboxes. The ingenuity of the peephole excited her since she could watch whenever she wanted to without being seen.

Through the peephole she got to know everyone in the building and they didn't know her, which she thought made it nice. She saw the

man who opened the Carroll mailbox. He was thinnish with blond hair, probably around forty. Then she felt relieved. It wasn't as though she listened to the apartment of a stranger.

If only she had ignored the intercom earlier this evening! But it made such a buzzing sound. She had pushed the "hear" button. She heard a whining or blowing sound, like the noise a microphone makes when it isn't adjusted correctly.

She sat there, recalling exactly what had happened after that. There were voices, a man's and a woman's. They were so loud it sounded like an argument.

She heard the man say something about "getting Martha." His voice sounded excited as he said, "I say we kill her this week."

She involuntarily withdrew her hand from the intercom button as she gasped.

"Kill her?" she repeated in a whisper. "Goodness gracious. Kill her?"

She quickly recovered and put her hand back on the "hear" button.

"We've put it off long enough. What else can we do but kill her?" she heard. "No one's going to do it for us. How long can we wait? And how would they ever find us?" the man said.

Then the voices faded as they moved away from the intercom.

She stood next to the wall, barely able to keep still she was so ex-

cited. Should she tell someone? The police?

"Maybe it's a joke. Or they may be actors or something, rehearsing like they do? Who would believe it? Kill—" she twisted a curl of grey hair.

For the next hour she listened at her wall, catching only snatches of conversation, nothing she could make sense of. Then it was suddenly quiet.

Now here she sat in her living room, thinking and waiting. The television was off. She wanted to be ready to listen and watch, but she heard nothing. After several hours she went to bed, still undecided about what to do. She slept fitfully.

Over coffee the next morning she decided that the only thing she could do was wait and listen. She finished her coffee then tried to tape the button on the intercom down so she could listen without having to hold it. The tape didn't hold.

She still had to go out for a few groceries and her paper, so she decided she would make the short walk to the market after Mr. Carroll left his apartment. The rest of the time she would listen.

Four days later the city paper had a story on the front page about the murder of a socialite in a nearby suburb. This was the second killing that week. She almost raced home and spread the paper out and began reading with an eager-

ness that surprised her since she had read little crime news until these past few days.

The second murder victim was a woman killed in her home. Police found no evidence of forced entry, a struggle or robbery. How familiar these police cliches were becoming, she thought.

At the next paragraph she gasped aloud. The victim's name was Martha. Police were looking for her husband, who had been missing for seven months. There was an old picture of him. She studied the photograph. "Could this be Mr. Carroll? With different hair?" She couldn't decide. She had only seen him through the peephole.

While she was debating what to do, she heard the door above her slam. He must be home. She went to the intercom and listened. She heard no voices, but she could hear someone walking around.

She made her decision. She would call the police and tell them she thought she knew something about the murder. If they wanted to come talk to her they could.

She got her telephone and carried it over to the wall so she could hold down the button and listen at the same time with a little juggling of the phone. The police department operator connected her to the proper department, where she got a Detective Bertand Sinclair. She stammered nervously a bit, but

managed to give him her name and address.

"I'm calling about the murder of the woman, Martha Prescott," she explained. "I think I overheard something about it. I believe I know about her husband."

"Can you come down to the station?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she murmured. "I don't have any way," she answered, thinking to herself that she would hate to go and miss something. Detective Sinclair said he would send someone over.

She was still holding the "hear" button a few minutes later when the door buzzer on the intercom unit went off. It startled her. She had to lean against the wall to catch her breath.

"The police must really think I have something to come so fast," she thought as she reached for the button to unlock the front door. Then she paused. Instead she pushed the intercom button and asked who was there. A man's voice answered, "Police."

She pushed the button to release the lock and opened the door to her apartment right away without looking through the peephole.

Her mouth dropped. She felt herself becoming weak and faint. As she sagged to the floor she heard him say, "I've come about the intercom. It's broken, you know. My unit amplifies, too." Mr. Carroll smiled.

The Big Roll

When you make your last pass, and the dice come up snake eyes, do you fold up, a loser—or kill to win?

by MICHAEL BRETT

AT TWO IN THE morning Lew Torrance looked out the living room window at the empty street below and listened to the quiet of the building and the meaningless words of his six-year-old son Georgie, who spoke from the terror of an unpleasant dream, then lapsed into silence.

A slim young girl stepped from a cab, glanced apprehensively in all directions, then hurried toward the safety of an apartment building. There was danger in the street for a young girl alone, he thought.

When Georgie cried out again he went to his bedroom and touched his shoulder lightly and said, "Georgie, it's all right. I'm here. You're all right, Georgie. Now sleep. Daddy won't let anything happen to you."

The clock ticked. Quarter past two. Another fifteen minutes and the man would be here. Torrance stared at the clear dark sky. The minute hand moved. Time was

moving very quickly now. There were only ten minutes remaining before the man would be here and it could all be over, ended.

He heard his wife in the bedroom and the soft slapping sounds of her slippers as she approached. She stopped at the living room threshold and he sensed her watching him.

"Lew," she called softly.

"It's all right," he said. "Go back to bed."

She came across the room, arms crossed, hands holding her shoulders, as though she were cold.

"Lew, what's wrong?" she said.

"Nothing's wrong, Joan," he heard himself say. "It's just business. That's all. I've already told you. Now don't start imagining foolish things." His voice softened. "Go on back to bed."

She shook her head. "I can't sleep. A business appointment at two-thirty in the morning, Lew. Why is a man calling on you in the



middle of the night? I want to know. Why are you standing in the darkness?" A pause. Her voice picked up intensity. "I've got a right to know, Lew."

She did, he thought. But he couldn't tell her.

He looked at her alert face, pale and frightened in the dim reflected light of the sky. She'd stuck by him during all the trouble, when he'd lost his business, money, and the house in the suburbs.

Suddenly he was back there, to

that time, all over again. That winter was unseasonably warm, so warm that people didn't buy winter coats. He remembered the days and weeks and months that he'd watched the thousands of new coats on the racks, unmoving, and the times he'd waited for the orders to come in that didn't, the heart pounding panic as the bank called him about his late loan payments. He recalled the pressure welling up inside him as the bright sun diminished the winter.

He forced it all from his mind and said, "Come on, Joan. Don't be silly. He'll be here in a few minutes. All he's going to do is ring the bell and I'm going downstairs to meet him. We'll discuss a little business in his car, or maybe we'll go to a restaurant."

Lew Torrance sighed heavily. "I'm trying to get an order. You can't blame me for trying to make a buck."

"But why doesn't he come up here? If you want privacy there won't be any problem. I'll stay in the bedroom. Honestly, Lew, I won't poke my head in. I won't say a word."

"That doesn't have anything to do with it, honey," he said patiently. "He represents a big chain store organization. He's a very busy man. A salesman like myself, working for a small firm, can't tell a man like that when to meet him. There isn't any shortage of coat manufacturers, Joan, and they're falling all

over themselves trying to land an order from an account that has over six hundred stores.

"All each store has to do is order a dozen coats. Add it up, Joan. Even if it's a smaller order; think what it could mean to us."

"I know. It's just that you've been acting so strange, kind of jumpy. You look worried."

"Ah, come on," he said. "You know better. If there was something worrying me, I'd tell you. I always have, haven't I?"

She smiled uncertainly. "This time I can't shake the feeling that there's really something wrong." She touched his arm. "Is there, Lew?"

He forced laughter. "Everything's all right." He walked away from her. She returned to the bedroom and he looked out the window and felt a hundred years old.

My God, he thought. Lew you're forty and you really do feel a hundred years old. How did it all happen? Two years ago you were on top of the world. You'd purchased the big old house in Sands Point—a white elephant your friends called it, but you bought it anyway, because Joan had always wanted an old house with "character."

There were the tall pine trees bordering the road and the semi-circular drive and the French doors and a big garden. There was all that old plumbing that kept breaking down and a pool filtration system

that had to be rebuilt two weeks after you'd taken title.

But it didn't matter then; all it meant was writing another check. What did one more check mean when there was all that money in the bank? He was his own boss then and he had the top coat designer in the business working for him and the best salesmen he could find to cover the country. Maybe it wouldn't have turned out this way if success hadn't arrived so quickly. Maybe you would have been more cautious, he thought.

All it had taken was two good seasons and the business was grossing millions. There was the money and it spread out to new people and vacation places, too numerous to remember. There were all those parties you'd given: Japanese lanterns illuminating the night, men in white dinner jackets, women in bare-shouldered dresses, all those affluent, important, interesting people who considered you their friend.

Joan had been thrilled by it. It was what she'd always wanted, the big stately house, servants, three cars in the garage, the extensive grounds. There were the glittering friends, the forced and constant sense of good cheer, the Country Club, tennis, golf, gossip. It became a world where their friends were in analysis, constantly learning things about themselves that the less affluent had to glean by themselves.

After the ordinary life he and his wife had known, he could under-

stand easily how they'd slipped into their new exciting life. There were all those diverse people, attorneys, doctors, playwrights, artists. Lew Torrance, a nothing guy, mingling with people like that. As he thought back over his life, he could see how it had all come about.

His gambling had really been at the bottom of it, he thought. He'd gambled as far back as he could remember. He'd been a product of the slums. At eleven he was making enough money playing penny ante poker to buy baseball admission tickets and a new bike. At fifteen he worked in a horse room. He read all the available books on gambling. In time he learned what the real odds were against winning and losing.

He'd won ten thousand dollars betting professional football and lost it two months later in a dice game in Kansas City, while working as a traveling salesman. With a two hundred dollar loan from a friend, he went to Las Vegas.

He spent four hours just making mind plays before he had the feel of a certain dice table and then he played cautiously with single dollar units.

When the table got hot he knew enough to ride the streak. He'd started at nine in the morning and walked away at one-thirty in the afternoon, when he felt that his play wasn't as sharp as it should be. He was fourteen hundred dollars ahead. He checked into the hotel

and spent the rest of the day lazing around the pool. At eight that evening he returned to the dice table, dropped a hundred dollars and walked away, because the time didn't feel right.

The next morning he returned to the gambling room after breakfast and by two in the afternoon had run thirteen hundred dollars up to sixteen thousand dollars.

He recognized the dark, natty man at once as Russ Breagas, since he'd viewed his photograph in the newspapers only a month ago when Breagas had been called up before a Senate Committee investigating national gambling.

In the next three hours Lew Torrance nearly doubled his money. Breagas was also winning and he and Lew were calling each other by their first names. They spent time together sunning themselves at poolside in the afternoon.

That evening when they returned to the dice table Lew Torrance's winnings were spectacular. He made four passes in a row, starting with two thousand dollars and doubled each time. He took his money, then played a ten dollar bill on the next roll. He rolled a four, then a seven. When he walked away, Breagas went after him and stopped him.

"Lew, there isn't any limit," he said. "The way your luck is holding out, you could run it all the way up. Let the chance go and maybe you'll never see it again. I've seen

it happen that way. Right now you're a winner. You've got to be smart enough to ride a winning streak heavy when you've got it going for you."

"Right now, at this minute, I'm a winner, because I'm walking away," he had told Breagas. "Besides, I've got the money already earmarked. I'm going into business."

Breagas had just laughed. "Maybe you've got something there. I made big dough riding along with you. I'm ahead. I'll see you around. Get in touch if you come back this way."

And that was the last he'd seen of Breagas for two years.

When he'd left Las Vegas he had enough money to start his own business. It was a shoestrapping operation. He fixed up a showroom and rented a factory loft. There was great difficulty in finding skilled help.

He'd invested his gambling winnings in a brand new business with no guarantees that anyone would purchase his products; and hiring a top designer at twenty-five thousand dollars was a roll of the dice. It was gambling and he knew it.

The designer came up with some beautiful samples. Buyers' reaction was good and Torrance shot the rest of the bundle on material and fur trimmings for collars. There were friends in the business who advised him to go easy.

"A warm spell and you're fin-

ished, Lew. Three, four weeks of mild weather and your business will go down the drain. Sure the styles are good, but take it easy. You're just starting out in the business. One mistake and you're finished. You haven't got the money to hold on with."

"All it's going to take is cold weather," he told his advisers. "I'm gambling we're going to get it," he told them. It was make or break.

"You're crazy, Lew," they told him.

They couldn't convince him. He shot the bundle. The factory went on full production and when the racks were filled, he borrowed money from the banks, using the coats as security and he produced more coats. He thought cold weather, talked it, and dreamt it. The last three winters had been mild. It was the law of averages. It figured. The winter had to be a cold one. He was counting on it. He had bet his world on it.

He had his gambler's reasoning. Produce a few coats, sell a few, and the money would trickle through his fingers like water. It could be a slow death.

He wanted a big roll of the dice. It snowed.

In October rain fell and froze on its descent. Snow whipped against the barren trees. A cold wind blew in from Canada. The snow continued for two days, then stopped and as the plows labored to clear roads

and highways, another cold wave swept the country. More snow fell.

There seemed no end to the bitter cold.

Ninety percent of the women's coat industry was caught unprepared by the demand. Lew Torrance was ready for it, sitting back like a fat cat. The telephone clamored for his attention. His desk was filled with orders.

His head was filled with the music of success. He left nothing to chance. He selected his customers carefully, no deadbeats. What good was selling coats if you weren't paid for them? He selected the transport carriers carefully. They had to be the fastest and the most reliable.

The season was a triumph. He paid off his bank loan, the wool cloth mills and the furriers, and after it was all done he realized a fine profit for himself.

For the next two years he could do no wrong. He was the man with the golden touch. His business flourished. There was the purchase of the big old suburban house and the new circle of friends, but he missed the gambling. He went back to Las Vegas.

Coincidentally he met Russ Breagas and their luck held good again. Lew hit the tables for twenty thousand dollars. He ran with his money and laughed all the way home.

That was in August, the start of the season. That was the start of the winter that was the mildest in

fifty years and it caught him hard. Thousands of heavy coats filled his racks.

He owed a million dollars to the mills and his desk was covered with cancellation orders. His money dwindled. Creditors made him sick with their requests for money. He couldn't borrow any more money from the banks. It was all finished. Bankruptcy hung over him like a starving buzzard.

He could declare bankruptcy or he could make some kind of settlement with his creditors and avoid it.

He did neither. He took his last seven thousand dollars and flew to Las Vegas and lost it within two days. Then he asked the hotel management if they'd give him credit. They made a few phone calls and got back to him. Of course they'd give him credit.

"How much do you want, Mr. Torrance?" they asked.

After he had lost fifty thousand dollars they stopped him. In desperation he called Breagas in Los Angeles. Breagas flew in two hours later, listened to his request for money and turned him down.

"No good, Lew. Your business is in bad shape. One of my men back east says that your business is floundering. That's a fancy word which mean you're about ready to go under. I don't think I can help you. I put my money where it does me good."

"A small loan, five thousand dollars. My luck has to change. I can

run it up and get these people off my back."

Breagas laughed. "All right; you got it. It'll be fun watching you. But what are you going to do if you can't pay me back?"

"I've got a car and a few shares of stock that'll cover it."

"Don't worry about it. Maybe you'll win," said Breagas. He laughed. "You've got a real gift for a crap shooter. You've got intuition, you take the odds and you walk away when you're winning. That's saying a lot for a crap shooter."

The money lasted eight hours. There was a time when he had twelve thousand dollars in front of him and he couldn't walk away because it wasn't enough to pay off his indebtedness. He lost it.

And then in a quiet corner of a restaurant, Breagas sat with him and told him that he would pay off his markers for him. "Take my advice, Lew. About what you owe in your business, forget it. Declare a bankruptcy; that's the only way out. But when you mess around with people who own these hotels, you have to pay them in full. They won't let you forget it."

"Why are you doing this?" Torrance asked.

"There's a way you'll be able to pay me back," Russ Breagas said. "You interested?"

"Yes."

"There's one thing you got to understand, though. If I tell you the

proposition, it's the same as you accepting it."

"It could put me in a bad position. How can I accept a proposition without hearing it?"

"That's up to you," said Breagas.

"All right," Torrance said, and knew he really had no choice.

"We've got a deal," said Breagas quietly. "A guy like you is perfect for what I have in mind. You're clean. No record. You've never been arrested. Who would suspect you if you killed a known criminal? Nobody. You've got no motive, no reason for it. It could be the perfect crime."

Torrance felt his heart beating very fast. "You want me to kill somebody?"

Breagas shrugged.

"I couldn't."

"You can do anything," Breagas said. "All you've got to do is put your mind to it. Think about owing these people in Las Vegas fifty thousand dollars."

"But to kill somebody in cold blood—"

Breagas said quietly, "We've got a deal, Torrance. I pay off your markers and you're out from under."

"But why me? I've never killed anybody."

Breagas nodded slowly. "That's why, Lew. Who's going to come looking for you after you knock somebody off? Nobody, that's who."

"I can't," Torrance said.



Breagas started to stand up. "Try to get out of the country."

"Wait," Torrance said, his hand on Breagas' arm. "All right."

That was the deal and now within three minutes the man would show up. Torrance walked away from the window and got his gun from the closet and placed it in his jacket. He put his gloves on and went back to the window.

He saw the car double park and a man get out and begin walking toward the building. He was expecting the bell to sound, but it startled him when it did, anyway.

"If I'm asleep, wake me when you return," Joan called from the bedroom."

In the car, sitting next to the victim, Torrance forced himself to stare straight ahead. Don't look at him. Tell yourself that you're going to shoot a faceless man. Look at him and you're going to see his face as long as you live. He wondered what Breagas had told the man. How did Breagas set the man up for this? What had this man done to Breagas that called for his execution? How had Breagas maneuvered him into this position?

They drove off into the dark, clear night.

"Where are we going?" Torrance asked.

"Staten Island," said the man. "I got to deliver you to an address out there."

"Breagas?"

"Breagas," the man snorted. "I ain't going to drive this thing all the way to Las Vegas."

"He's out there now?"

"Yeah."

Torrance felt a great weight pressing down on him. He turned and looked at the driver. The man was a stranger, that's all, a complete night stranger. All you have to do is aim your gun, pull the trigger and kill him. Where do you find the strength for it? What had this man done that would justify wiping out a fifty thousand dollar debt by his death?

A trailer truck roared past them on the Verrazano Bridge with startling suddenness. His mind reeled with the arrangement he'd made

with Breagas. It was like playing against the house, Torrance thought. They had the edge, always; the odds were with them. In the final analysis they called the shots the same way Breagas called them.

All right, Lew, so you kill this man now, but you don't know if Breagas is going to send another victim along. Maybe one more after that. And in time Breagas would also kill me. It was a certainty. There were never two winners in a game. The house won or the player did. That was the way it was. It was a crystal clear moment.

He glanced at the driver again. He'd have to call his wife later, and tell her that he'd be gone for a few days. They were in Staten Island now, traveling on a darkened road. Traffic was sparse, but they were moving too quickly.

"Slow down," Torrance said. "There's a diner just around the next bend. I need cigarettes."

When their speed abated, Torrance fired twice. The car filled with sound and the stench of cordite. The man slumped over dead. Torrance grabbed the wheel and his foot jammed hard on the brake. He managed to steer the car on to the road's shoulder and brought it to a stop. He moved very quickly now, running around to the driver's side. He trembled as though his heart was going to explode, as headlights from an oncoming car lighted the road. He froze. The car went

past him and its lights split the darkness and was gone. Tire sounds faded. Silence.

He took the man out by his heels and dragged him toward the trunk and lifted him inside. As an afterthought he went through his pockets and removed his wallet. He examined the driver's seat carefully, wiped blood stains up with his handkerchief and got behind the wheel. He observed the speed limits carefully as he recrossed the Verrazano Bridge and headed east. A curious cop could be disastrous now.

At Kennedy Airport he drove into a long term parking lot, parked, and counted six hundred dollars in the dead man's wallet. Torrance pocketed the money. He tore up the parking receipt, the dead man's driver's license and all other identification and scattered it before the night wind.

Then he made his way to the airline terminal, found a phone booth and called his wife. "Joan, honey, it's a wonderful opportunity. I'll have to leave town for a few days, but there's a chance to close a big deal. With a little luck we'll be right back on top again."

"That's wonderful. I love you, Lew," she said.

"Take care of yourself and Georgie. I'll give you a call when I get there."

"You didn't say where you were going, Lew."

He hesitated, then said, "Out west, honey. I'll give you a call. So long now. I've got to catch my flight."

Torrance hung up, stepped out of the booth, then purchased a ticket to Las Vegas with cash and took ironic delight out of using the name Harry Chance.

He went up to the observation deck and waited in the darkness, watching the airplanes, listening to the high shriek of the jets. The night trembled with their arrivals and departures.

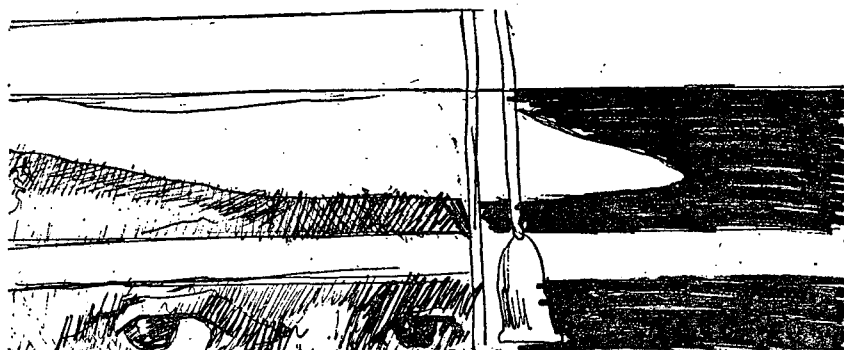
He stood back in the darkness. I've killed a man, he told himself. It wasn't as tough as I thought it would be. I can do it again. Who'd suspect Lew Torrance, a salesman, of killing a multi-millionaire gangster named Russ Breagas, crime czar? The odds were right for it.

Later, he'd have a chance at the dice tables. He had a few hundred dollars.

He would have to watch it carefully and wait for the one big roll. A little luck and he'd be right back on top again.

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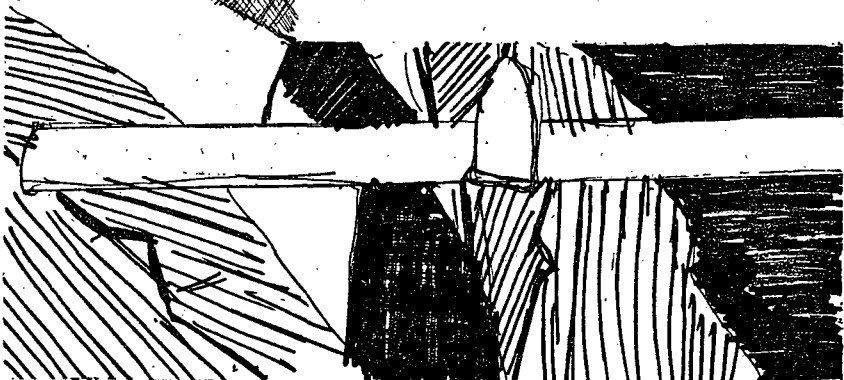


He was a mild little man. Very gentle, very polite. He had only one fault. If he looked at you long enough—you died!

by MORRIS HERSHMAN

RAY WORTH said, "That's a lot of nonsense! Do you expect your own husband to believe in the supernatural?"

"It's true." Edie Worth put a



hand to her heart, as usual when her judgment was disputed. "The man stood in front of Dr. Arbuckle's house all night, and on the next day he died."

"Arbuckle was sick. He'd had a heart condition for years. Sooner or later he was sure to die, only sooner in his case. So was that old Mrs. Culp, who suffered from an aortic aneurism."

"But *he* stood in front of the house."

"You mean the man called Gray because he always wears gray. All you know about him is that when he stands in front of a house somebody in it dies very soon."

"Yes, and you know where that man is right now."

Roy pushed back his chair from the kitchen table and stood up. "I could understand your getting excited about it if we lived in Africa, for instance, but this sort of thing doesn't happen in Lakevale."

"Look outside," Edie suddenly whispered, both hands around her heart area. "You know how sick I am. Don't argue with me, Roy. Just look."

He walked over to the window. A man stood across the road, facing them. The swiss-cheese colored full moon lighted him so that it was possible to see him leaning against a pole with his legs crossed. He wore a gray topcoat, a gray pair of pants, and a hat to match.

"Do you want me to call the police? He's loitering after all, and I

suppose he can be arrested for that."

"Go see Hugo Bradford," she insisted. "He's on the police force. Maybe he'll know what has to be done."

"It's late at night to be disturbing neighbors."

"Please," she said in a choked voice.

Roy glanced angrily at his wife, noticing how much her figure had run to fat. The once lovely bosom had started to sag, the legs had become much thicker, and nobody could have called her face a youthful one any longer.

He shrugged and strode over to the phone.

She said quickly, "Hugo only lives across the street, Roy. I don't want the whole town to know about this."

Glumly he nodded. She wouldn't quit pestering him, he knew. He had been married to her for twelve years.

"I'll be all right here," Edie said. "And please go out the back way so *he* won't see you."

"I'm going out the front way. It's my house and I can do that much if I—"

She said hoarsely, "My medicine, Roy. I need my medicine."

"You always do need it when I want to do one thing and you want me to do another."

But he brought it all the same, along with a teaspoon and a half-filled water glass. Edie swallowed

an orange pill from the bottle and settled back.

He went to the closet and put on his coat, jacket, and fur-lined gloves. He was still muttering about a heart condition being used by some patients to get their own way as he walked out the back door. Wind made his skin tingle.

Roy's jaw jutted out when he passed in front of the man called Gray, having changed his route on purpose; Gray didn't look to the right or left. The Bradford doorbell was answered by Hugo Bradford himself, who invited Roy to the living room for a drink. Bradford was a tall, muscular man who'd been decorated for bravery during the Korean war and was now a police sergeant.

"I can guess why you're here," Bradford said, "and I advise you and your wife to take no notice of the man and help smash his racket."

"Racket?"

"Gray has established himself as sort of a harbinger of doom. What he now does is determine who in town is sick and phones the head of the house at work, if at all possible, and asks for two thousand dollars to stay away. You'd be surprised how many people pay up."

"Well, he's varying his method with us," Roy said promptly. "He just appeared and that's all."

"Maybe you'll get a phone call tomorrow, when your wife is more thoroughly scared," Bradford said. "I'll call the boys to take him away,

but it'll bring you some publicity, heaven knows. And he'll only come back when he gets out of jail.

"There's really nothing that can be done. No one wants to testify against him. We only heard about his real racket by accident. One of his victims has a nephew who's a stenographer at the courthouse."

"You'd better have him taken away," Roy decided. "For Edie's sake. She really does have a heart condition, you know."

"Okay," Bradford said. "We'll try to scare him out of town, but it won't work with anybody like that guy, you know. He'll come back and take up his stand where he left it."

"I'm tired of being pushed around by him or by—well, never mind. Good night, Hugo. Give my best to Miranda and the kids."

Roy was muttering under his breath when he left Bradford's house. He wondered if it would settle Edie's mind to tell her the truth. Probably not. She had decided on what she wanted and was too stubborn about having anything but her way.

Roy walked to the curb till he was directly in front of the man Gray. It only took a minute. As he passed by he said: "You wasted those phone calls you made to me, buddy, so do the worst to my wife that you can. The very worst."

Roy Worth remembered to wipe the smile off his face as he let himself into his house.

*War was a plaything and trackless murder
its toy, as Joe Rodriguez followed a jun-
gle death trail to seek the end of the Tele-
graph which had promised doom to all!*



Air Force insignia, Hanley was also CIC and a member of Major Rene Cazenave's XN-1 detachment back in Saigon. When Rodriguez received his orders to temporary duty in Thailand, Hanley at the same time was sent to shepherd the former rookie detective of Hollywood on this assignment, his first without sergeant's stripes.

Hanley swung around in his seat and saw that the capacity load of napalm fire bombs was still riding securely in the fuselage, and that his flight engineer was snoozing contentedly on one elbow at the radio operations table nook.

"Did Cazenave give you any idea what you're going up against in Thailand?" said Hanley.

"Not a line," said Rodriguez.

"I can say this much," Hanley said. "What the CIC commander tells you at Kor Nut Ratcha is going to chill your blood. You won't want to believe it, but you'll have to."

Hanley filled him in on the weird political customs of Cambodia, the odd-ball country which still played buddy-buddy with France. Joe Rodriguez was glad to get the information. Like most Americans, he had not quite sorted out the various loyalties in the hot belt of tropical countries that ringed the Gulf of Siam.

When the Skytrain crossed into Thailand and got lined up on the beam towards Kor Nut Ratcha airfield, Lieutenant Rodriguez knew

fairly well where he was going. He was entering a country which welcomed United States aid to help solve its national problem. The problem was to screen out the Pathet Lao Communist forces of neighboring Laos on the east and the envious rulers of Burma on the west. Not to mention helping defend against any future overt moves of hysterical Red China, which already had half of Vietnam under its control.

Major Mathews waited in a jeep at the ordnance bay where Lieutenant Hanley taxied the C-47 on Kor Nut Ratcha airfield. Mathews was short, rugged, and tanned the color of walnut stain. He possessed the steady-eyed appraisal that Joe Rodriguez associated with a detective.

"You picked the right day to get here, Rodriguez," the major said with a grin. "You and the new commanding general turned up on the same day. Jump in. We're going to his reception."

A short way on up the apron, Rodriguez saw a C-123 with three stars painted on its nose. That would be the flying command post of Lieutenant General Henry S. Bray, newly assigned supremo of all U.S. Air Force operations in Southeast Asia.

Adjacent to the runway complex, the jungle thickened in a natural camouflage. Major Matthews drove into this great green tent, under which lay a hidden reserva-

tion of barracks, bashas, huts, go-downs, and canvas tents.

He stopped at the headquarters quadrant of the 439th fighter bomber wing. Above the spread of facilities in the murk of the jungle, the rich foliage of banyan and teak trees shut out much of the sun. It was possible for a chairborne commando in this forest cave to retain a milk-white complexion, though he worked only seventeen degrees north of the Equator.

As Joe Rodriguez and the major approached, good old-fashioned Dixieland jazz bellowed out from a kind of summer house of woven bamboo, which had been slicked up with violet rain forest orchids and red hibiscus at its doorway.

The dark eyes of Rodriguez lit up with pleasure as he walked in and paused to allow a saffron-skinned lovely to take his service cap and khaki windbreaker. The willowy little receptionist was the first of numerous sleek young women who came into view as he made his way with the major to the reception line inside.

Other Thai girls, all lovelies with the tilted eyes, and teen-age busboys, served trays of drinks. Near the general and his party at the focal point of the line, two American girls assisted in making introductions to the Old Man.

Major Mathews saw the bewildered on Rodriguez's face and said, "The Thai kids work at the

officers' club. The blonde is Joanna Raymond, the commandant's private secretary, a GS civilian from the Pentagon. The gal with the coal-black Dutch-cut is Lily McKimmey, Red Cross girl from San Francisco."

"This is war?" said Joe Rodriguez with a grin.

"A guy at the Pentagon sent out the wrong script," said Mathews wryly.

When Rodriguez and Mathews reached the honored guest and the adjutant introduced them, General Bray's set smile changed abruptly to seriousness. Deep-set somber eyes of the gangling big fellow fastened on the castle insignia. Rodriguez judged that the general was one of the very few in the crowded room who knew that he and Major Mathews were Spooks.

The general raised his foghorn voice to include his hovering aide, and said, "Bring the major and Lieutenant Rodriguez to my quarters tonight."

Then Rodriguez was taken in tow by Lieutenant Ed Hanley and pulled away. In rapid order, he met Lieutenant Louis G. Faneuil, manager of the club; Warrant Officer Randall Rogers, Mess Officer; Souvanna Chavane, French-Chinese cook at the club; Chavane's wife, Ba Chavane Le Thuy; and their daughter, tall and blooming Kali Le Chavane.

Joe Rodriguez bowed left and right to various people, trying to

retain in his head their names and a distinguishing feature or two of faces and bodies. For he assumed that Hanley and Mathews would not have made a point of getting this job lot of people conveniently together for him to meet without a reason.

The one and only person whom Rodriguez had a chance to talk comfortably with, away from the usual babel of empty cocktail conversation, was a young pilot, Lieutenant Tom Grimes.

Grimes was a shining-faced chap with a silver bar on his shoulders and silver wings pinned over his left shirt pocket. The lieutenant sized him up as more or less typical of the younger Thunderchief and Phantom pilots in the squadrons of this undeclared war in Southeast Asia.

Lieutenant Tom Grimes said, "There's going to be a lot of encore knocking out, or I miss my guess."

"You mean that ground defenses are getting tougher?" said Rodriguez. He was testing Lieutenant Grimes for any tendency to loose talk.

"My flight leader learned his trade in Korea," young Grimes replied. "He says the flack is worse here than in any war."

Then Grimes checked himself, looked around sheepishly, and with a wink, said, "I wonder who's doing all this careless spouting around here? You hear any blabbermouth talking trade secrets?"

"Not a line," said Rodriguez. "Must be two other lieutenants."

Joe Rodriguez was glad when a little Thai waitress pitty-pattered up to them with a tray of gimlets, switching the subject far away.

AT THE GENERAL'S quarters, two high-rankers were already present and were introduced to Joe Rodriguez as Colonel Kennedy, Base Commandant, and Colonel Wedemeyer, Wing Air Commander.

General Bray arrived shortly with a red-eyed, weary-looking lieutenant colonel.

"This is Colonel Pedrofsky, gentlemen," Colonel Kennedy said to Rodriguez and Mathews, indicating the unidentified officer with the silver oak leaves on his blouse. "My A-two."

"You may talk freely," General Bray said. "Electric counter measures have been set up in this area."

Colonel Pedrofsky nodded.

The general continued, "I'll start by telling you why I have been assigned to this theater of war. It is because I am something of a cop myself—in the Air Force, that is. I served two tours of duty as head of Intelligence in the Pentagon and one tour of special duty with the CIA. My first job here in Asia is to find out how the enemy is able to know our targets in advance of our strikes."

Rodriguez reacted by straightening his back slightly at the revelation. No one had hinted that such

a situation existed. Joe Rodriguez's eyes went motionless in contemplating the horrors attached to the simple statement.

The general continued in harsh staccato tones, "Our undercover agents in Hanoi, Haiphong, Nam Dinh, Vinh, and Dong Hoi have given us a sad picture. On every single day of strikes, the North Vietnam portable surface-to-air missiles have been jockeyed around at the very last minute and concentrated to ring the major targets of the day. Our pilots have been forced to fly against unlikely odds. How is this vital information reaching Hanoi ahead of our formations?"

He barked out the question almost as if he expected his audience to reply then and there.

First to break the uncomfortable silence, Rodriguez said, "Have our communications people tried jamming radio beams before the missions, sir?"

"That's your department, Pedrofsky," the general said.

"Yes, we have," came the weary answer, from the red-eyed lieutenant-colonel. "A counter measure team has been secretly located on the Laos border, near the Panhandle of South Vietnam. We've jammed every standard beam in the book, between briefing room time and arrival over target. And our tapes show there has been no enemy radio transmissions to jam."

Major Mathews sighed: "The



Chinese in World War Two used a crude heliograph method to flash bomber approach warnings from the coast to Kunming. Do you know if our flight pattern has been checked on the ground for mirror relays?"

"No," said the general drily. "Take-off for most of our strikes has been before dawn, and though at that sunless time, the target information has filtered through in time to trap us."

The general ordered a case of cokes and beer. The men sat down to attack the problem in earnest.

By 0100 hours, four points had been worked over, as follows:

1. Target specifications were ordinarily sent from Saigon to Kor

Nut Ratcha by scrambled radio code. Had the enemy broken the code? All agreed that such could be the case, though it was certainly not probable.

2. Was admission to the briefing room strictly controlled? The commandant stated frankly that any system of military security had its flaws if the truth were known. He promised an immediate recheck, primarily to see if any unauthorized personnel got in to the room before or even after the briefing began, such as on errands or to bring refreshments to early arrivals.

3. Were maps covered, blackboards erased, or material otherwise guarded after the session with the target-master? Yes, they were. Carefully and personally by Lieutenant Colonel Pedrosky.

4. Did anybody have access to pilots and radar observers on the flight line immediately prior to boarding and take-off? The commandant agreed to review his SOP on this matter right away.

Colonel Kennedy then reminded the general that assembly of aircraft and take-off on a mission had the very same problems and tensions now as used to obtain in World War Two when the general was captain of a B-17 in England. The ground crews, the paper merchants, the blanket counters, the assorted women who somehow wormed their way on to the base, all were on deck here in the humid

and hot jungle land of Thai, even as in England a generation ago.

The colonel's unnecessary reminder to the general, who was a man ten years younger than Kennedy, proved to be a tactical error. General Bray suddenly stood up, deliberately yawned out loud, and ended the conference. A general never listens to lectures: except his own.

To Major Mathews, Bray said, "Your investigation starts officially in a few hours, at briefing. This time I have personally chosen the targets. Worked them out in a guarded room in Saigon myself. There can be no leaks in advance this time, if indeed there ever were."

He began shucking his shirt off as the officers left the room. A charpoy draped with green mosquito netting was ready to furnish the Old Man a bed for the brief remainder of the non-working night.

Back at the summer house, a few officers still sat around, testing the ancient theory that a good man could drink enough to sink a battleship.

Mathews said to Rodriguez, "Let's listen in to these admirals. See if security means anything on this base."

But nary a hint of anything concerning flying, or targets, or the enemy, was let out by members of the late watch as they laughed away jungle boredom in the next half

hour. So Joe Rodriguez accompanied the major to his tent quarters and went to sleep.

SHOWING HIS I.D. card to the AP sentry at the wire barrier in front of the basha, Lieutenant Rodriguez entered the security perimeter that surrounded this so-called briefing room. It seemed extensive enough, he thought, to prevent a spy with an electronic pickup from recording the briefing bit.

Inside this bamboo-and-banana-leaves structure, he came upon what at first appeared to be a jerry-built jungle movie house. In point of fact, the place turned out to be just that, when not used for briefing purposes.

More than a hundred pilots and radar observers in their blue flying suits and fur-lined altitude jackets occupied the center mass of benches. A few armorers and supply officers, adjutant's order cutters, and miscellaneous group and wing level brass huddled to one side. No civilians were in the room.

Some late arrivals among the fighter-bomber pilots drank coffee and chewed on doughnuts. Rodriguez heard one pilot rib a companion, saying, "So you're flying today. Did the major put a pistol to your head?"

On the plank stage, General Henry Bray studied a blown-up map of northeastern Thailand, Laos, and North Vietnam above

the demilitarized zone separating North and South Vietnam.

At 0330 precisely, the general faced around. The audience went still as death. The Old Man spoke. Joe Rodriguez noted that his voice was now even more gravelly and jumpy than it had been at his quarters.

"Your number one target is Thanh Hoa," he said, pointing to the map. "On the Gulf of Tonkin, south by west of Haiphong. The enemy is building a spur of railroad below Thanh Hoa, trying to extend the rails from Thanh Hoa down to the DMZ. You will pinpoint your rockets and fire bombs on the railroad west and south of Thanh Hoa. It is a source-of-supply target. When you hit it you knock out future VC strength showing up in the villages of South Vietnam."

As secondary targets, the general now assigned each of the three squadrons of A Group to oil tank farms in the channels of the Red River Delta tidelands southwest of Haiphong and Hanoi.

"Colonel Kennedy's people have packaged your air maps. The armorer has given his mix formula to ordnance. I counsel you flight leaders to make your first rocket salvo count. We have no new information on the number of surface-to-air missiles. A higher percentage of SAM's may now be mounted on portable sites. Thanh Hoa has never been hit before with

more than a single squadron. You should blow the holy hell out of them. That is all."

Colonel Kennedy's adjutant snapped out, "Atten-SHUN!" The general walked out through the silence of a ramrod audience.

Rodriguez joined the surge for the door.

Outside, he was stopped short in surprise at the gathering of assorted men, women, and native girls and boys at the wire barricade and its squad of air police sentries.

The crowd was mystifying to Rodriguez until he saw the pilots and radar observers rush to a collection of tables arranged around an oversize banyan tree. Faneuil and Rogers were in charge of this last-chance snack bar. They had evidently served up a flyaway breakfast of juices, coffee, and Danish for any fly-guy feeling empty before the dash to the wild blue yonder. Now they were supervising their native staff in policing up the spread.

Joe Rodriguez found Major Mathews in the throng and let him know immediately what he thought of the questionable arrangement, security-wise.

"I don't like it either," said Clark Mathews. "Never did. But it's a custom started by Colonel Kennedy. You're right. There's too much opportunity for a slip—an unforgivable, foolish yelp of information."

Ten minutes later the problem

in field security had disappeared. Cans of juice and pots of coffee went begging. The throng was now a quarter of a mile away at the edge of the runway, behind revetments for protection against rising veils of fierce heat from the aft thrust holes of braked steel birds.

In the lead plane, Wing Air Commander Wedemeyer caught the operations go order in his helmet phones, cut the brakes, revved down the runway, flashed up at a 45-degree angle, and then seemingly pulled 35 other F-105 Thunderchiefs as a string of lethal beads high up into the milky white of the pre-dawn sky over Thailand. The formation was Go.

Rodriguez considered the shock effect of this sudden super gale of jet engine exhaust volume over the green and silver countryside. A spy of the Pathet Lao in nearby Laos could scarcely miss such whopping evidence of a three-squadron strike to come. Then he thought more deeply. The Pathet Lao might get a general warning, yes. But not the factual information of targets.

But—who could be sure? This was Asia, where the big puzzle was invented. It was Asia, where subtle deception was a fine art of defense as well as of entertainment.

The far mountains of the horizon were now awash with red and gold in the east as the sun broke into view. High in the blue rode massive cloud, ships of flamingo

pink and gold-burnished white. In that inspiring frame, 36 Thunderchiefs sliced forward faster than the speed of sound.

Joe Rodriguez and the major hurried over to operations to wait for the call of battle to be relayed from the air by Commander Wedemeyer.

They were on their second cup of coffee when routine code reporting ended and word 'broke in the clear that chips were down.

"SAM at one o'clock low," the voice of Colonel Wedemeyer came in—a distorted yell over the operations loudspeaker.

"Watch SAM's. All fronts watch SAM's. Ten o'clock low. Watch SAM's. Eleven o'clock low. Twelve o'—"

A crackling pause. Then matter-of-factly: "I'm hit. Direct hit belly. Steve Smith take over. So long, gang. Best of luck, guys—"

In a few seconds, a new voice came through, saying amid the crackle, sputter, and roar," Major Smith, gang. Watch SAM's, guys. They're coming up all over hell and gone. A massed battery of SAM's. Able Squadron, who's that hit? Able Squadron leader, report."

The report came over almost too distorted to be heard. Joe Rodriguez made out the following, "Lieutenant Grimes hit, major. Direct missile hit. So long, Tom."

Joe Rodriguez held his hands over his eyes, to shield his reaction

to the incredible news. He had known young Tom Grimes less than the hours of a day, had taken a deep liking to him, a forever kind of liking, and now the shining face of his friend was forever gone. Rodriguez's dark eyes went motionless, glittered hard.

He said to Major Mathews, "Whoever sent that target information through, I'll get him, I'll find him; I'll kill the bastard if it's the last thing I do on earth."

When the formation returned later in the morning with three Thunderchiefs missing, General Bray reacted in much the same way as Joe Rodriguez. He summoned Mathews and Rodriguez.

"Blake Wedemeyer and I," he said, "had arranged a code word between us, so's to keep from admitting openly that the enemy had stolen a march on us. If Wedemeyer saw an unusually large concentration of surface missiles rising up to attack, he was to inform me by using the word 'watch', as he did when he said 'Watch SAM, watch SAM.'"

"Well, he was able to confirm to me the truth of our situation before he went down himself, the Lord rest his soul. Now we are doubly-assured that the enemy has a spy or spies right here on this base. It can be no other way because I alone knew the targets in advance. It seems impossible but it is true.

"There is treachery some place.

As for my reaction, I have changed my travel orders. I am staying here, not going back to Saigon. You and I must solve this thing fast, gentlemen. I will help you move heaven and earth to try to pin down our security leak. I know that you must feel as I do about this horrible situation. What do you recommend as a first move?"

Rodriguez had anticipated such a demand for immediate action, in any direction—as long as it was action.

"I suggest that Detachment XN-forty-three be reinforced, so that we can begin multiple surveillance in all likely areas," Rodriguez said.

"I agree," said Major Mathews, "except that my detachment is actually a paper tiger. We have inexperienced people in Bangkok headquarters, for the most part. None has worked as a plainclothesman in a police department. The IBM machine must have ticketed wrong and sent us real engineers instead of reserve cops."

"May we call on Saigon for help?" Rodriguez said.

"Saigon. Hawaii. The Pentagon. Anywhere."

Rodriguez then suggested emergency requisitioning, through Major Rene Cazenave at headquarters of Detachment XN-1 in Saigon. He needed three people who, he knew, were perfect types to investigate key phases of the case.

To probe the relationships of the numerous Chinese working on the

Kor Nut Ratcha Air Base, Rodriguez wanted Ling Mao. The influential old man of Cholon, Saigon's Chinese city-within-the-city, had formerly been mayor of Kunming, before being driven out by the Mao Tse Tung Reds two decades ago.

Ling Mao's lively daughter by a Vietnamese wife was Poc Lo Nang. She had worked with Rodriguez previously. Poc was known the length of Tu Do Street's cafes by successive waves of G.I.'s, as a standout among the corps of attractive B-girls. Rodriguez wanted Poc to look into the private lives of the Thai girls who were civilian employes in PX and various base offices.

The third requisitioned person was Nurse Lieutenant Rosalie Anspacher, to administer a slug of truth serum here and there if necessary.

Three new Spooks working simultaneously at Kor Nut Ratcha should give Major Mathews more time to mastermind the case, Joe reasoned.

The general acted. His voice-scrambled radio telephone call went at once to Military Assistance Command in Saigon. Help would be on the Thailand airfield before the sunset gun and *Call To Colors*.

IN THE 439th fighter-bomber wing's personnel section, Clark Mathews and Jose Rodriguez sat at a work table, examining a pile of

documents in the locked and empty room.

As in standard police procedure back in Uncle Sugar Able, their suspect list included everyone known to have any access to the key people. In this case, the key people meant the brass, the pilots, the radar observers who flew as copilots, and miscellaneous support experts.

Joe Rodriguez was reading through the files on Lieutenant Louis Faneuil, while the major considered the background of Warrent Officer Rogers. Also, civilian worker files had turned up old General Services application questionnaires filled out by Souvanna Chavane, the French-Chinese cook at the club, his wife, his daughter, and Joanna Raymond. Background on Lily McKimmey was available in Saigon headquarters of the American Red Cross.

The names of a dozen and a half additional Thai men and women who worked in various office and menial capacities for base sections, were also backed up by sketchy material in personnel files.

Major Mathews proposed and Lieutenant Rodriguez agreed that on the first go-round, only rough familiarization would be made. Only unusual circumstances in a person's life would be noted down as possible sources of leads.

Time was the essence, if pilots were to fly on equal terms against the enemy.

Two hours later the investigators came up with a slim handful of "straws."

Joanna Raymond had participated in an early sit-down demonstration while attending University of Chicago. The cook, Souvanna Chavane, had been pastry cook for a Japanese officers mess in Bang-



kok during World War Two and had cooked for a French general in Hanoi in 1953. W/O Randall Rogers had been washed out of a flying school in Texas as a young man during World War Two. Several swamper and waitresses had Thai police records as street demonstrators for obscure political causes.

Of all the people, none could be regarded as a prime suspect. Both Mathews and Rodriguez agreed on that. But they knew that they had to check everyone out, as any good detective would.

Major Mathews smiled, noting the glare of frustration in the lieutenant's flat eyes. He said, "At times like this on the old beat in Detroit, we used to come up with what we laughingly called The One Possible Solution."

He paused and now laughed

outright at Joe Rodriguez's show of consternation.

"The One Possible Solution, Joe, to many cases. Did you ever see that famous night club mind reader Dunninger? Ever see Dunninger call out the social security card number of a stranger in the audience? Well, maybe the Commies have an Oriental mind reader waiting at the barricade after our briefing—ready to latch on to target names."

The major's little joke was not very funny. For Rodriguez was still seeing Tom Grimes's Thunderchief take a missile straight into the thrust port and the airplane explode in a shower of yellow smoke.

Poc Lo Nang revived his spirits when she flew in shortly from Saigon.

"Show me job, Joe," she said eagerly. The emerald green of her almond eyes in the saffron face made him think of polished jade under a gold lighting. Her molasses colored hair shimmered in its doughnut twist.

"There's nothing new for you to learn, Poc," said Rodriguez with a laugh. "You will be a first-class hostess here, with a little waiting on table and a dash of discotheque on the side. But no hustling for bar orders. Remember that. And, mademoiselle, you will have to lay off the gin and the Saigon Tea—"

"I know," she broke in. "Thai-rand biggerer funnier than Viet-nams. You biggerer rieuenant

now, Joe boy. I not clabbing yo' act."

For this thoughtful consideration, Rodriguez was quite pleased and showed his appreciation by putting a ten, a five, and a dozen one-dollar bills into her hands.

Those engravings of Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington were the equivalent of solid gold in Southeast Asia. They would buy piasters by the basketful in Saigon and Ticals, Satangs, and bahts in goodly quantities in Thailand. They would exchange fifty-fifty with Military Payment Certificates (MPC), American PX script money.

Joe Rodriguez wanted pretty Poc to live up to the image of a distinguished hostess—that is, entertainer-dancer of class from the top cafes of Tu Do Street. Thus would her progress in detection be made easier at her two places of work: the officers' club and the enlisted men's club, on alternate shifts.

With Rosalie Anspacher, Rodriguez had no preparations to make. He merely greeted his medical friend at the runway in a jeep, saluted her, and renewed acquaintance as they drove to the field hospital.

The problem that Rodriguez did face up to was Ling Mao. Ling did not fit into a group easily. He looked too commanding. The middle part of him resembled a globe and his head a satellite moon. He

dressed in the black stovepipe pants and embroidered silk house coat of an ancient Mandarin.

Rodriguez arranged with personnel to give Ling credentials as a cook specializing in salad-making—and to insist that Souvanna Chavane add him to his already crowded kitchen staff.

"You honor me by call to action," Ling Mao said to Rodriguez, in his South China drawl.

What a mystery it was that the educated Ling Mao had never gotten around to teaching his flighty daughter the niceties of correct speech. For Poc Lo Nang had invented a patois of her own, combining many assorted ideas and accents of the seaport city of her birth: Saigon, the Paris of the East.

Lieutenant Rodriguez now left Ling Mao in the Chinese living quarter of the base and returned to Major Mathews' office, which was part of the logistics headquarters in a remodelled rice go-down. He came upon Poc waiting for him there.

"Wife of cook," she said caustically," she say to me 'Go home Saigon you cheap chippie.' I forrow her, see her meet mustache man."

"What do you mean, Poc? Who was he, a Thai civilian worker?"

"No. He Yankee buck sordier. No fry boy. Mustache rike Bob Hope fliend Jelly Corona."

That description could only mean Warrant Officer Randall

Rogers to Rodriguez. The big W.O. affected a stage villain's mustache. His warrant insignia of rank was on the order of British pips rather than American bars, leaves, or stars. He was not a rated officer: no fly boy, as Poc termed it. Not for nothing did the military say that a warrant officer was neither fish nor fowl, though tolerated in the off-duty company of both.

Rodriguez judged at first that the cook's wife had merely thumbed a ride with the mess officer. But to encourage Poc to continue her alertness, he drove her down the jungle side road in the direction of the Rogers jeep as she remembered it. Soon they were out in the clear and near the reaches of the runway at the last battery of marker lights.

There another clump of thick jungle began. The weathered grey pinnacle of a Buddhist forest shrine peeked out of the heavy foliage lining the road ahead.

Rodriguez turned back, saying, "The man you saw was Warrant Officer Rogers, the mess officer. He could only be driving down here to some farm maybe, to make a purchase of fresh eggs or a crate of chickens. The lady was probably going along as interpreter. You better make a new start, Poc."

The girl's green eyes blazed with yellow swirls. She said, "She say me bahd girr. She can jump in rake go to herr."

Later, when he reported to headquarters, Rodriguez was told.

by the major that there were no farms close to the route that Rogers had taken.

"I wonder," Mathews said evenly, "if that jasper is making time with the cook's old lady? It's funny, but I had him pegged for a cradle-snatcher. I thought he was after Kali, the daughter."

"The man is strong for the fil-lies?" said Joe Rodriguez.

"No more than any of our young tigers, Joe. But the kids fool around just to have a gas. Rogers, he makes his passes with a meat cleaver. About as subtle as a carnival barker."

Nevertheless, Rodriguez and Mathews were quickly forced to put Rogers out of mind, for Rosalie Anspacher walked in with a disturbing item of news.

In her familiarization tour of the crude hospital facilities on the base, she had come across a green young pilot who was being confined to an isolated tent. The chap was awaiting examination by a psychiatrist.

"Some terrible shock turned him on," Rosalie explained. "It's like listening to a tape recording of a campus peace demonstration. He mumbles slogans he's seen on placards. Like 'Hey, Hey, Bombs Away—How Many Kids Did You Kill Today?'"

"What's important to us," said Major Mathews, "is to find out when he reverted to Stateside memories this way. Was it after a near miss this morning by a flock

of SAM's? Or did some half-baked lefty on the base turn him on with scare talk? Let's look into this one."

They hurried to the base hospital, sat down in the surgeon's office to wait.

LIEUTENANT Frederick Varla Anderson was twenty-six years old. He had attended four small junior, state, and city colleges in Southern California for brief periods, and then stuck it out two years at Berkeley to receive an A.A. degree: Associate in Arts.

From there he had received an ROTC appointment to flying school and won his silver wings. There was no real evidence in black and white of any sympathies with the organized anti-war movement that had swept some American campuses.

General Bray and his aide returned from their examination of Anderson.

"Put that man on the next hospital plane for the States," the general ordered. "There's a psychiatrist at Oak Knoll Naval Hospital with the know-how to shock him back to being a pilot again. Right now he's not responsible for what he's saying."

Mathews asked permission to see Lieutenant Anderson. The general approved. In a few minutes, led by Rosalie Anspacher, Joe Rodriguez and the major entered the tent. A handsome young tow-head with bush-cut hair framing a

face the color of yellow jaundice, looked at them vacantly. The solid yellow complexion was from an overdose of atabrine, the over-worked jungle remedy.

"Time for your pill," the nurse said gently. He lifted his head. Rosalie plopped a goof ball into the man's mouth and fed him a drink of water.

In the next five minutes, Major Mathews kept up a running fire of two questions, "Are you ready to fly tomorrow, Anderson?" and "Who's your wing man tomorrow, Anderson?"

The repetition reflexed. Fred Anderson. Suddenly the vacant quality in his eyes disappeared. "Any word about Tom Grimes?" he said.

So that explained the current delayed-action shock.

"Fred," said Rodriguez, "have you had any visitors since they put you in this tent?"

"Faneuil said hello," said Anderson. "He promised to come tell me if Tom ejected in time. I saw Tom get hit. Two missiles got him, one right after the other. I had to dive—"

The eyelids closed unexpectedly and Fred Anderson seemed to be asleep. But soon his mouth moved. He mumbled weakly, "Get out of Vietnam. De Gaulle was right."

Rodriguez whispered to Mathews, "Maybe this Lieutenant Faneuil can tell us what's really bugging this pilot."

Rodriguez found the officer's club to be a comfortable big basha, woven of bamboo ribbing and stitched with palm leaves. The bar, of native teak wood, ran half the length of one wall. A five-foot insigne plaque of the Wing was mounted back of the bar. The blue and gold colored heraldic shield was flanked by dozens of bottles of liquor. Thus did the new breed of fly-boys carry on the traditions laid down by their fathers and uncles in Southeast Asia in 1942-45.

Beyond this noble bar was a jerry-built kitchen serving the mess area which occupied the principal concourse. In the remaining corner was a lounging area stocked with rattan chairs and tables.

Lieutenant Louis Faneuil ran his minor principality from a small accounts office, presiding over a bench on which lounged three saffron beauties in slit tunic skirts. Faneuil was a man ready to cooperate, Rodriguez found. He began talking after getting Joe's pledge of confidential handling.

"Did you know Anderson State-side?" asked Rodriguez.

"We're both from Southern California. Fred lived in Pasadena. I lived in nearby Sierra Madre. I met him when he was going to Pasadena City College."

"Why is he on this anti-war kick he's talking a streak about?"

"All I know is that he left Pasadena City College because he was disappointed. There was no

sentiment there for any beat stuff. He probably went elsewhere looking for fellow sympathizers. There was a trend on in those years. However, he got over the beatnik kick. He switched in a hurry when the red-hots at the coffee spots began to make a hero out of him. He was afraid it would brand him for life, keep him from ever getting a decent job.

"I know this to be true because he came to see me when he left Cal and got the chance to become a flying cadet and was leaving town. I hope the Old Man understands that quite a few young fellows went through such a pacifist phase. It was just a part of growing up."

Back at CIC headquarters, Rodriguez learned that Major Mathews had received an urgent call to return to Bangkok and had left an order to his spook troops on the base that Lieutenant Rodriguez was in charge.

A half hour later a curt summons came through from the commandant.

"Do you fellows want us to lose a perfectly good cook?" Colonel Kennedy said sternly. "Souvanna Chavane says his Chinese staff is threatening to quit over his new salad chef Ling Mao. Ling rubs them the wrong way for some reason. Go down there, Rodriguez, and remove Ling Mao if necessary. Get your surveillance some other way."

Rodriguez said, "Yes, sir." But

he did not intend to do any such thing.

He jumped in his jeep and sped back to the officers' club. Lieutenant Faneuil was cornered with Souvanna Chavane there, and both were talking loudly at the same time.

Joe Rodriguez stood by, noting that the moon-faced Chavane had been deceiving in his first impression. He was not exclusively a pleasant cartoon character after all. He now appeared serious and competent, and he spoke up strongly to Faneuil.

Listening, he gathered that the cook was talking down Ling Mao, while Faneuil was trying to explain that the U.S. civil service employees cannot be fired without a hearing, even in faraway Thailand.

Rodriguez interrupted, saying, "Where is Ling Mao? I want to hear his side of this."

Souvanna replied, "He is afraid. He think I gong kill him. Run like hell."

The fat cook pantomimed the statement, holding an imaginary knife over a cutting block, whapping it down.

"Hold on there," Faneuil ordered. "Tell the lieutenant which way Ling Mao went."

"He go to the airfield."

Rodriguez thanked the club officer and started away on a nearby path that led to a network of revetments where twelve F-105 Thunderchiefs, a squadron's flight

unit, were protected against any chain reaction destruction in event of a fuel explosion.

It was not like Ling Mao to take such a course, the young military detective thought. Ling's personal M.O. was to avoid association with Caucasian activities and to stick closely to his own people, as he did back in the Cholon enclave of Saigon.

The path soon ended, around a revetment wall. Wire barricades began at the end of the path. An air policeman was on duty. Rodriguez inquired if a fat old Chinaman had come through the gate in the past half hour.

"No," the AP said, "but a flock of Chinks did. They were mess jockeys."

"How many of them?"

"Let's see. Five. Big guys with hard eyes. Mountain Chinks. And a boss man, that halfbreed cook at the officers club. He vouched for the others and for the sacks of potatoes they had in the truck. Then he went back alone, walking to the club."

"That's funny," said Rodriguez, "taking potatoes away from the mess."

"I thought so, too, and I said, 'Come again?' The cook said they were rotten potatoes, palmed off on him, and he was sending them back to the roadside market."

Rodriguez now rushed back to the club. Souvanna Chavane had plenty to explain to him. There, he



found that in the twenty minutes or less it had taken to walk to the barricade gate, and come back, Souvanna had broken off the argument with Lieutenant Faneuil and disappeared.

Faneuil, nonetheless, was not perturbed at Joe's frustration. Faneuil said that the cook was a natural busybody, that he often went to the clearing in the jungle, where the Chinese families congregated to wash clothes and visit. He speculated that Chavane was hooked by the fantan games known to be flourishing among the Chinese of the base.

LIEUTENANT RODRIGUEZ dined at the club that night on Souvanna Chavane's excellent menu of a Calcutta curry, New Zealand beef, and brazed turtle eggs direct from the canals of Bangkok. He noted that Chavane was still absent.

But there was nothing that could be done about finding him. At sundown in Southeast Asia, human ac-

tivity comes to a stop. Particularly in the boondocks, where the only night light comes from the stars and the moon.

Rodriguez debated pros and cons of the Chavane absence before dropping off to sleep in Maroj Mathews' vacated charpoy. At reveille he hurried to the officers club. Chavane was still absent.

When he had eaten breakfast, he went to the Chinese quarter of the field alone and asked a small boy there to take him to Ling Mao's tent. He came upon Poc Lo Nang. She was pinning up the doughnut of molasses-colored hair on her head when Rodriguez called out and the tent flap opened.

She was ready for the day, dressed in a brilliant sheath of cornflower blue. Her jade eyes lit up with pleasure. She evidently had no fears whatsoever about her father being away all night.

"My papa terr me, Joe," she said, "he forrowing mess boys. He say they Yunnan Plovince punko boys."

Fine, thought Rodriguez. Young Chinese Reds had no place working in an American military installation.

At the same time, he decided that Poc could be of further help to him. For now in daylight he wanted to check out the Chinese meeting place on the river rapids. There was a chance that Souvanna had stayed there overnight at some card game.

Possibly, too, Ling was also there on his tailing work. Since there was bad blood between the two men, Rodriguez figured that he was the one to end any trouble that right now might be brewing.

Accordingly, Rodriguez drove with the peppery Poc to the river road, the same one on which Warrant Officer Rogers had headed with the cook's wife in a jeep.

In the gloom, the still air smelled acridly of ammonia from festering compost, though at the same time it was sharpened by whiffs of fragrance from exotic blossoms. Rodriguez sensed the presence of hidden but alert birds, monkeys, snakes, and elephants.

After several miles the jungle thinned overhead and Joe and Poc came out into a clearing where foaming water poured through a rocky passage of the tributary, enroute to its meeting with the mighty Mekong River to the east.

Tiny Thai women worked on the shore, beating clothes over the rocks. There was no sign of any men and no huts in which gamblers could be out of sight. Rodriguez drove on, over a small teak bridge, into the little-known plantation country.

Before heading out into the unknown, Rodriguez checked his .45 in its belt holster and his carbine on the floor of the jeep. American troops were forbidden to carry firearms in their regular rounds of advisory duties in Thailand, but

the spook troops carried theirs regardless.

Rodriguez now instructed Poc to watch the road closely for any strange object or happening. It was ambush country.

The road led up and over a rolling hill, then down and out of sight of the base runway far back. Now it was open country, with only a few terraced hillsides and no people in sight. The red earth shone like some rich ore in the sun. Fields steamed from the mounting heat of mid-morning.

Rodriguez swabbed off his moist forehead. He was growing damp all over. He wondered how Poc managed to sit up pertly, her green eyes fun-filled with shafts of topaz light.

In less than ten miles a small valley leveled out among the hot hills and a group of red-tiled adobe huts came into view ahead. Soon an access road turned into the village area enclosed in an eight-foot high compound wall. No one was in sight.

"Prantation," said Poc. "Peop-ers gone. Maybe go Bangkok fo' monsoon season. Come back rater."

"Okay," said Rodriguez. "Let's see what's in the big mud building down the line."

He drove on—and soon an unlikely sound reached his ears: the sound of young women shouting.

The sound came from beyond a wall on which dark green bougain-

villea bushes puffed up several great mounds of brilliant cardinal blooms. Rodriguez had heard the same sort of gully sound from beyond the walled confines of an estate swimming pool in the Hollywood Hills back in the States.

When the jeep moved around the end of the wall, he found that he had been right in his guess.

An Olympic-size pool with diving boards and lounging furniture along its edges, stretched out before the amazed gaze. The trim young bodies of two saffron-hued women and two husky men moved about in the clear blue tank of water.

Joe Rodriguez looked again closely.

One of the men was the pirate-mustached Randall Rogers. One of the women was sixteen-year-old Kali Le Chavane, the cook's daughter. The other two people were unknown to him. They appeared to be Thais of an age either side of thirty. In their vivid green tourniquets of the mode Bikini, the women might have stepped out of a blackout skit in Las Vegas, or an Italian beach movie.

Either Warrant Officer Rogers had made a lightning-like trip to Bangkok, or he was goldbricking. Rodriguez decided to find out. Though he wore only one gold bar of grade, the lowest in the book, he nevertheless actually outranked the W.O. and therefore had the right to demand an explanation.

When Rogers swam lazily to the pool's edge, Rodriguez said, "They have you checked out to Bangkok. How come you are out here in the boondocks living the life of Reilly?"

Rogers blew water from his mouth, gazed back with a measuring stare, and did not reply for some time. Finally, he said simply, "Hello, Rodriguez. Did they send you here with a message for me?"

"No."

"What are you doing here, then? Who put you wise to my little hideaway?"

Rodriguez said, "I'm looking for a man named Ling Mao, the Chinese gentleman hired the other day to work on Souvanna Chavane's staff. What do you know about him, Rogers? He's missing from the base."

"Missing? He must have been run off the base by Souvanna. It wouldn't be the first time. I can't help it if personnel tries to palm off trouble-makers on Souvanna."

Poc came in by this time, having heard. She burst out, uncontrollable at the downgrading of her father, saying, "You rie. My Papa no troubermake. He biggerer kitchen zecutive."

"Well, you won't find the old boy around the plantation, at any rate," said Rogers. He swam away in apparent disdain, diving under Kali and pinching her legs.

"He seemed too ready to have

us believe that last," said Rodriguez to Poc. "Come on. We'll make out we believe him, then look around for ourselves."

They started back. Rodriguez raced the engine loudly, creating an effect of departure, and drove back out of sight beyond the wall. He went off the road and behind a giant stand of hibiscus, entirely out of view of anyone who might be looking from the plantation fields.

A small Buddhist temple marked the end of the rough compound formed in part by the swimming pool's wall. Rodriguez and Poc proceeded on foot to the group of mud huts surrounding the temple. Doors were missing from the huts, so he was able to see that no one was presently living in this part of the farming village.

Still, evidence was everywhere that whoever lived here had left in a hurry. Kitchen utensils were on tables, as if recently dropped while a meal was in preparation.

"Quick gone," said Poc. "Something funny hopen." She looked fearfully around her. Then she said, "I go temper, Joe. I ask he'p Gautama."

"You do that, Poc," Rodriguez said. "We're going to need all the help we can get to trace down your father."

He was checking out the last of the half dozen empty huts when Poc Lo Nang rushed back to him and careened into his arms. Her



as she lay on the dirt floor of the hut, bringing her back out of shock to face the awful grief. He lifted her up and she clung to him.

"I am going to make a military arrest of Randall Rogers, just in case," said Joe Rodriguez. "He knows a lot more than I do about this plantation—who owns it and who lives here. He must know something that can help us catch whoever killed your father. I am going to take Kali Chavane into custody for good measure. Why is she here without her parents and in a strange place with Rogers? Can you shoot a carbine, Poc? You will have to help me guard them until I get to the nearest air police-man."

"I do," said Poc.

THEY DROVE BACK to the big swimming pool. Rogers and Kali were gone. The man and woman remained, sitting on chaise lounges. Joe demanded to know where the missing ones had gone.

"They went away. They left after you did," said the Thailander. "I am as surprised as you. Randall Rogers came here often. Sometimes Kali came with him. Sometimes her mother. But never has he left suddenly this way, like running away. Not saying good-by."

Rodriguez asked identification and the man said his name was Amnat Pong, grain merchant, and the woman was his secretary Ba

face was a horror mask, a livid yellow. The green eyes shone from globes of shock. She pointed outside, and grimaced. She said, "Pa-pa," pronouncing it "puh-PAH" as a little French child would.

Rodriguez let her sink to the floor. He ran swiftly to the temple. He pushed his .45 out at the ready, snapping off the safety catch with his right thumb. He moved inside the temple without a thought to removing his shoes.

An alabaster statue of a red and gold enamelled Buddha sat in the middle of a lacquered altar on which vases of lush jungle blooms shown. This Buddha was, as most, contemplating eternity through close-slit eyes. His folded hands held wilting flowers tip to tip.

He was also contemplating the death of a loyal follower, Joe next learned. For in back of the altar, and roped to a crude chair was the plump body of Ling Mao. His eyes dilated, his arms and legs set in rigor mortis, he seemed a wide-awake imitation of Gautama.

Rodriguez walked back slowly to Poc. He gently rubbed her face

Wang Saphung. Joe interpreted to himself: Mrs. Saphung, undoubtedly the wife of some cuckold peasant or villager.

"Do the people from the military base stay here overnight some times?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," the secretary broke in. "In back of the temple compound."

At this volunteered revelation, Amnat Pong exhibited dismay. Joe Rodriguez judged that Pong had been planning to play it more cozy than his girl friend. Now it was too late. Amnat Pong agreed to bring Rodriguez and Poc to the quarters which he said were used by the Americans.

They found it to be a kind of Asiatic hostel, located outside the compound wall. It was barren enough, with only four cots and racks of mosquito netting. Scarcely worth investigating.

They were walking away when Poc's sad gaze fixed on something that made her halt suddenly and point.

"What dere?" she said to Amnat Pong and indicated a hut with a door and a Yale lock on it. Poc had spotted the unlikely brass lock.

"The plantation owner's," said Amnat. "The quarters of Bok Namo, who is in Bangkok with his family."

Rodriguez said nothing to alarm Amnat. But he felt exhilarated. This locked quarters must have

something in it worthy of locking up from prying eyes.

He took Pong and Mrs. Saphung back to the pool and their cabana to dress—and while they were thus occupied, he and Poc sped back to the Bok Namo apartment hut.

A tire iron, with a brick for a fulcrum, pulled off the hasp of the lock in short order.

Joe Rodriguez walked in, amazed. The place was larger than the others he had examined. It was jammed in its three rooms with dozens of articles of military origin. It seemed a combined pawnshop and storage warehouse: of binoculars, G.I. cans of fuel, blue flying suits, fur-lined altitude jackets, boxes of C-rations, jump boots, sun glasses, radio sets, rifles, pistols, PX jewelry, boxes of candy, cases of beer.

He judged that the contents could start a first-rate black market in military goods, superior to any he had seen on the streets of Saigon.

At a work desk in one of the rooms, Rodriguez surprisingly came on an Army telephone in its green canvas case. Connection wires led to it from the hut ceiling. He lifted out the instrument and turned the hand crank to ring whoever might be hooked up. No answer came after repeated tries.

He now began the careful search for the "who" in this case of thievery. He did not want to pin it

down willynilly on anybody not present to defend himself. He was after hard-line evidence.

Several mess menu lists, with notes on food crossed out, were there. That could put Rogers in on more than simple pool accommodations. Faneuil may also have been a member of the secret swimming group and friend of Bok Namo, as evidenced by a half-used bar chit book of the Kor Nut Ratcha officers club bearing his name.

Whether Tom Grimes had been here or not was not known for certain. But a reminder of the earlier years of his brief life unaccountably showed up: in a membership list of a college. *Committee to Stop War in Vietnam*. The list was a printed roster on the torn-out page of a publication named GLARE, printed in San Francisco.

As Rodriguez worked away at the small stack of papers and publications which had been collecting dust on the table top, Poc returned from her roaming of the apartment. She held out a single sheet of paper on which was written a jumble of names and signs.

She said, "Is tik-tik terragraph?"

It was exactly that, Rodriguez decided excitedly. Names of cities and towns and names of industries and activities were listed. The mass of words was equated, one word to one combination of long or short "dots," in the manner of the Morse Code. For example, he

noted, Thanh Hoa equalled three short dots and two long dots. The words "oil tanks" equalled one long dot and two short dots. There was a page of combinations for towns and industries.

But why invent a kind of Morse Code when the regular code was available? Rodriguez decided that some halfway intelligent person had reasoned the other way. That is, some person who did not know the Morse Code, but had use for a combination of simple signals, figured this out all by himself for secrecy's sake.

Immediately, the line of thought impelled him to think in terms of a telegraph wire. Were there overland telegraph lines north of Kor Nut Ratcha into Laos and Red China?

It seemed improbable. The Pathet Lao group in northern Laos was Communist and Thailand had cast its future with the Americans. Thailand also distrusted Red China and would want no special communication with her.

While these thoughts ran through his head, he became aware that Poc Lo Nang was now back to the first terror of seeing her father dead. She was crumbling before his eyes. Her pretty face was twisting in the agonies of barren realization. He looked and decided to drop the investigation for the moment.

"We are going back," he told her simply. "I'll get what help I

need and return to bring back your father."

Joe Rodriguez placed the Thai man Amnat Pong in charge of the deserted plantation, saying that he would arrest him later if he tried to run away like his friends had evidently done.

"You will find Randall Rogers?" the Thai man said in parting.

"Why do you ask?" said Joe.

"I am afraid of him," said Amnat Pong. "He ordered me to come here with my secretary. I did not want to come. I am afraid of him. He can ruin me. I hope you find him and report him AWOL."

"We're not only going to find him, but you are going to help us," said Lieutenant Rodriguez as he drove away.

IN THE general's de-bugged quarters at Kor Nut Ratcha, Lieutenant Rodriguez put the piece of chalk down, following his blackboard description of the plantation hideout, and said to his audience of four superiors, "I need a helicopter gunship and two people from the base to make this search. No telling what kind of a guerrilla band we may run up against."

General Bray came in, saying, "You'll get two helicopters, one to bring back the body of Ling Mao. We owe it to his daughter to show proper respect in burial honors to a former Mayor of Kunming."

"The two people I need, then,"

said Joe," are Lieutenant Fred Anderson and Poc Lo Nang."

"Anderson is still hospitalized, awaiting the next hospital plane home," said Colonel Kennedy. "Why do you want him with you?"

"I'm betting that a trip to the plantation will shock him back to reality," said Rodriguez. He then explained that Anderson was one of the men who had been identified intimately with protesting college placard carriers. He was a likely candidate to shed light on why the magazine page, with its roster of former red-hots, had been found in the hut.

"Why do you want to take along the Vietnamese girl?" said Lieutenant Colonel Pedrofsky. "We've had too much of this fraternizing with foreign nationals."

Rodriguez wanted the worst way to remind the A-2 openly that the Americans were the foreign nationals in this case. Not the peoples of Southeast Asia. But he wisely kept his tongue, merely saying that Poc was the right party to take females such as Kali in tow.

Rodriguez left the meeting feeling grateful to the general for the manner in which he had reacted to the disclosure of thievery. He had halfway expected the Old Man to blow up in anger, refusing to believe that such thievery was possible.

But fortunately for Joe Rodriguez, the general had served his time as the Air Force No. 1 Intel-

ligence Officer. Bray was one of the few in service who had the opportunity to see dossiers on misdeeds.

In the end, Major Clark Mathews was ordered back from Bangkok to take over the ground area phase of the general search and Lieutenant Rodriguez received the immediate air phase. Their mutual goal was to account for the whereabouts of five people: Randall Rogers, Souvanna Chavane, Ba Chavane Le Thuy, Kali Le Chavane, and Lily McKimmey. Lily, in her own independent-minded Red Cross girl way, had disappeared too and left no word on the check-out board.

Since the discovery of the crude code, the search was vital. For on the evidence so far, the thieves of military goods apparently also held the key to how target information was getting through to the enemy.

Not waiting for a new day and a fresh start, Rodriguez and Poc Lo Nang went at once to the field hospital to check on Lieutenant Fred Anderson.

"He's coming along fine," Nurse Rosalie Anspacher reported. "But not well enough to go buzzing around Thailand in a chopper. That is, unless I go along, too, with the needle and stuff to bring him around if he takes an unexpected relapse."

Rodriguez considered the problem and made a snap decision. He

transferred Rosalie's duties as flying nurse to Poc Lo Nang. Poc had rudimentary hospital training as a candy-striper in Saigon. In addition, slender Poc helped the aerial weight problem more than buxom Rosalie.

At 1620 hours the helicopter search party, piloted by the versatile Lieutenant Hanley and with Fred Anderson and Poc Lo Nang as crewmen, rose gracefully up from the field and slid away swiftly towards the lush green plantation country.

Soon they skimmed the last of the hill ridges and swept down into the valley and to the small concourse of the compound.

Rodriguez's appointed guards, Amnat Pong and girl friend, awaited them as though they might have been plantation hosts instead of candidates for the hated Suspect List.

The lieutenant stopped there first, ahead of Major Mathews who was to follow in the second helicopter, because he chiefly wanted to take Anderson into the locked quarters in the hope of reflexing the flyer's confused, semi-blocked memory.

Also, this was his last chance to double-check the material in the desk. And finally, he knew that Poc wanted to pray for her father alone in the temple.

Nonetheless, Rodriguez did not get the chance to fulfill his wishes, because Amnat Pong spoke up im-

mediately, with a tale so fantastic that it captured complete attention.

"We, myself and my secretary, Ba Wang Saphung, went to Gautama," said the innocent-faced Pong, "to cleanse our hearts of unwanted association with evil. In the temple, Gautama willed that I examine his hands closely. There in Gautama's lovely hands I saw flowers; dead flowers. Flowers placed by some unknown worshipper. Then I saw that two little copper wires held up the flowers which once had exhaled their sweet perfume unto the Great One.

"I reached up to remove the wilted flowers—and wires touched—and a white hot spark shot out before my eyes. I beg you, lieutenant, to come see for yourself. A wonderful miracle is being performed."

Wires, thought Rodriguez, wires for words to ride on.

He hurried from the chopper to the temple and stopped before the alabaster statue of Buddha. Into his view came the frozen face, the dilated eyes of the dead and stiff Ling Mao, staring at him from beyond and below the level of the altar table.

Rodriguez slid on work gloves and reached for the wilted flowers in the hands of the statue, while a thought ran through his head: this is no sacrilege because it is definitely not intended that way.

The wires touched and sparked white.

The writing on the paper in the hut at once reflexed into Rodriguez's photographic mind: three short dots and two long dots equals Thanh Hoa.

He touched the tips of the wires briefly three times and held the touch longer to make two long dots.

The riddle was solved.

Here was the business end of a signal wire sending an improvised and original version of Morse Code. The job now was to follow the wires wherever they led.

"Poc," he said, "go back to the helicopter and wait for me."

He did not want her to follow him and thus have to view her dead father again.

When she left, Rodriguez walked around the altar and examined the underside of the flat table. Wires came through tiny holes above. Then the bare wires melded into taped and insulated red wires, and together the pair of red wires went out the temple's side wall and over the compound.

It was quite clear now why poor Ling Mao was dead. The dilation of his eyes—rigid as gun barrels—proved it. He had been trapped as he came upon the hidden wires, tied up, and then forced to absorb the killing shock of raw electricity until dead.

Rodriguez followed on the other side of the compound. Soon he

saw the red wires on bamboo poles and heading out across the fields of the plantation.

"A do-it-yourself kind of telegraph line," Rodriguez explained to Ed Hanley and Fred Anderson. "Can we follow it in the air?"

"Why not?" was the answer as the CIC flyer buckled up his seat belt. "We have an hour of sunlight left."

Observing for the pilot, Rodriguez leaned out of the waist gun bay and trained Navy-type binoculars on the occasional flick of red wires that shown from below.

Poc and Anderson leaned out of the opposing gun bay and attempted to keep track of the red wires or any other suspicious objects that might pop into sight below.

Rodriguez and Anderson kept up a running comment as the aircraft drifted right or left of its generally northern direction.

"Port a bit," Joe Rodriguez would yell until the pilot heard and acknowledged with a "Roger dodger."

"Starboard over the jungle clearing."

"Rodger dodger."

So it went at tree-top level. Branches shook in the flurry of rotor wind. Leaves scattered and blew away from the powerful downdraft. The raucous ka-chunk ka-chunk of the motor suggested the pile-driving of dozens of miniature poles.

After about quarter of an hour, the red wires disappeared. At the point of vanishing, the chopper eased down over a clump of foliage. Rodriguez jumped off four feet up and pushed into the foliage, following the wires.

In seconds, he came upon a relay box hook-up with insulated dry batteries and a hand-cranked generator. Unsurprisingly, it was marked "United States Air Force Equipment." Another example of stolen property.

The relay box served the wires in the temple. The generator supplied powerful juice either way—ahead on the north wires, to speed the message to still another relay station, or back on the south wires, to burn the life out of Ling Mao. On signal from the temple, the waiting hand-crankers worked away along the line.

Joe Rodriguez gave the word to continue. Now it would not be necessary to stop to examine other relay stations. Since the operators had disappeared from the first stations, it was plain to him that a code alarm had warned them all along the line.

Now he speculated on why the plantation was deserted: the workers there had been warned that the CIC had come on the base in force to seek out criminals. Likewise, Joe considered, the Chinese mess boys "returning" their bad potatoes at the airfield sentry box, were actually in the act of flight

from the base. Poor old Ling Ma must have learned of a plantation rendezvous of some sort and had managed to get ahead of them, enroute to Baknamo to discover what he could for CIC.

From the relay box, the red wires continued north, at a lower level sometimes and under the cover of jungle tree tops.

Given clear daylight, Rodriguez figured that it would have been no difficult job to spot where the wires later emerged. But now the first murk of swift equatorial sunset was diffusing. The chase had to be abandoned.

"Just as well," Lieutenant Hanley said when he learned of their growing difficulty. "I've got a fuel problem now. The nearest American depot is Bung Phom airfield to the west in the high hills. We can all go there and RON, or—"

Rodriguez said, "Why don't you take Fred in alone, gas up, see the medic, and return at first light? That will mean you can carry more gas for the search tomorrow."

"Good," said Hanley. He kicked up a floor pad of grey rubber from the cockpit and said, "Let this be your ground marker for my return, if you have to hide in the bushes."

When the chopper rose and putt-putted away into the folds of the dark hills, Rodriguez and Poc sat down on a large flat outcropping of rock to enjoy, as best they could, the unilluminated dinner

hour: a C-ration menu of canned ham and eggs, wheat biscuits, and instant lemonade mixed in a canteen.

Rodriguez had few worries over setting a watch for the night, since this was Thailand where no enemies were normally expected. However, Poc contradicted him at once. She had numerous worries. She refused to go to sleep unless a schedule of watches was set up.

Her worries had to do with unexpected swarms of hungry jungle bats, which would have to be shooed off with a stick; of jungle dogs, which she said attacked humans when famished, and who regarded feet and toes as choice morsels of food; and then there were many poisonous cobra and krait snakes which slithered beneath grassy patches waiting to strike.

Rodriguez agreed with her thinking, after recitation of the list.

For the next five hours, therefore, he sat on the rock, or patrolled back and forth, noting the grand sweep of the star wheel around the axis of Polaris. It was a time to think in purest silence after the crazy cries and chatter of the day had died down in the nearby jungle clumps.

Exhausted from her day of terrible sorrow, Poc now slept like a kitten. Seeing such utter relaxation and knowing that it would be good medicine for her, Rodriguez decided that he would risk a fleet of

hungry bats during the remainder of the night.

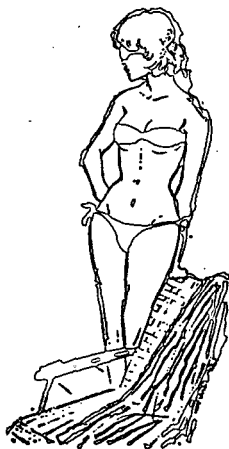
He propped himself against a ridge of the great rock and slept like he had learned to do in bivouac training long ago.

He awoke shamefacedly. For the churn of the helicopter motor came to his ears and he looked up into the grinning faces of Ed Hanley and Fred Anderson. Poc had let him sleep, just as he had previously refused to wake her for the midnight watch.

Soon Hanley settled down on the rocky pad and Joe and Poc climbed into the chopper. Lieutenant Anderson, Joe observed, was looking more fit today. He was wedged in between dozens of G.I. cans of gasoline, the margin of safety for them all should the search stretch out well into the day.

"I contacted Major Mathews," Anderson said. "He traced the field telephone in Bok Namo's apartment back to the little Buddhist forest shrine off the base runway."

IN A QUARTER of a mile, Rodriguez spotted the red wires again, rising out of the jungle foliage. They were now openly attached to the tops of hardwood trees which thus served as makeshift telephone poles. This fact alone told Rodriguez that now they were very close to Laos, if not already beyond the border to that ill-de-



fined land. There was evidently less need for hiding the wires in this remote area.

After an hour and more of steady progress, Hanley called for Lieutenant Rodriguez to come to his side. In the noise and commotion of air buffeting, they discussed the situation ahead.

"The Pathet Lao can be expected anywhere from now on," said Hanley. "We're west of the Plain of Jars and they just about control it. That means Chinese weapons. It could even mean anti-aircraft guns against us."

Then Hanley smiled and said, "I figured something like this might happen. So I had the markings painted off the chopper at the Bung Phom depot."

Joe Rodriguez assured Ed Hanley that the goal was well worth the chances being taken. That

goal was still to trace down the terminal of the wires. At the terminal, Joe's hope was to capture the persons receiving the messages, and sweat out of them the names of collaborating people at the plantation or on the base itself.

Morning mists in the higher regions of the Mekong River canyons helped to hide them henceforth. They saw fewer people below. Joe Rodriguez judged that these mountain dwellers were long ago conditioned to the racket-making helicopters of the Americans.

At mid-morning Hanley told Rodriguez that the strange route of the red wires was now proceeding north by east along the Ou River channel and that to the north by west ahead was Mt. Chien Pau, 6043 feet high. The chopper had come more than 400 miles from Kor Nut Ratcha.

Joe Rodriguez looked at the map—and immediately guessed the answer to the long, long path of the otherwise strictly amateurish telegraph wires and the recurring relay stations.

The destination had to be inside North Vietnam. It could well be Dien Bien Phu. There on the map beyond the range of mountains whose crest line was the boundary line between Laos and North Vietnam, was the town and airfield in which the Communist forces had penned the French Legionnaires in 1954 and took their surrender

on terms of departure from former colonial glories.

Remote Dien Bien Phu, neighbor of northernmost Laos and of Yunnan Province in Red China, was the logical receipt point of intelligence from Thailand. The town's known military communications center undoubtedly could make swift connections with Hanoi.

Rodriguez passed the information along to Lieutenant Anderson. "Go ahead," was his response, though the penalty of entering and being caught was imprisonment or worse.

The red wires now veered from the Ou River bank, up into a range of low mountains eastwardly, and the chopper followed. Over the crest, the red wires ran down in a rough line of ditches, then of streams, then soon along a military road.

A scattering of burial mounds, like weathered beehives, announced Dien Bien Phu before its rash of mud huts and tin-roofed shanties could be seen.

Then the red wires suddenly ended—inside an aging go-down or warehouse building of white-washed wood planks. A'top the go-down was nailed a tattered dark red flag of the People's Republic of North Vietnam with its single centered star. A black-painted jeep was the lone vehicle in a parking square outside the door of the sagging wood building.

Rodriguez went to Hanley and said, "We'll take the chance. They'll probably think we are locals from Hanoi or visitors down from Kunming."

"Okay," said Hanley. He settled the chopper down gently next to the jeep.

Rodriguez, Anderson, and Hanley stepped out, leaving Poc with orders to stay inside the fuselage and out of sight. They hurried to the go-down door. Each held a .45 at the ready. The door had no handle, but it gave in to Joe's push.

Rodriguez stepped in to a near-barren office room. Maps covered the walls like wall paper. A wooden table was encompassed by stiff bamboo chairs. One door-opened into the warehouse proper, which appeared piled with jute sacks of rice and grains.

Two men were asleep on cots under the maps. Both woke up, showing in their haze of sleep the dismay they felt over the fact that three Americans were on the deck and ready to capture them.

One of the men was Souvanna Chavane. His moon face was for the moment not comic looking. The other man was Randall Rogers. His out-size mustache appeared apt: the vanity of a true pirate.

"You are under arrest, both of you," said Rodriguez. "I represent U.S. Army Counter Intelligence Corps and you are officially ob-

liged to obey me or accept the consequences."

Rodriguez elevated his .45 for further emphasis.

"Arrest him," Rogers cried out, pointing to his cook, Chavane. "I was brought here at the point of a gun. Chavane forced me into a truck at the plantation, right after you left the pool, Rodriguez. You believe me, I hope—"

"Go ahead," said Rodriguez. The sound police tactic was to keep a suspect talking.

"The next stop was a liaison airplane he had stashed away in the hills," said Rogers. "Last night we landed in Dien Bien Phu. The North Vietnamese Intelligence kept me up all night interrogating me. Then Souvanna brought me himself to this dump."

Joe Rodriguez did not believe a word the big man said, but he did not make an issue of it now. He figured to get the truth out of him later. He was too busy thinking about how to carry the two of them—huge Rogers and fat Chavane—in the chopper and escape by the high route over the mountains, where extra weight was a sad penalty.

To Hanley, Rodriguez said, "Do we have any wire to bind these fellows?"

"Hoist rope," said Hanley. "There's some in the chopper. I'll get it."

"You might also figure out," said Rodriguez, "what to jettison

to make up for the added weight of these two."

Rodriguez now poked Souvanna in the shoulder with the barrel of his pistol, and said, "What have you got to say for yourself? What Rogers just said puts the blame squarely on you."

The cook ignored the demand, remained silent for a time, and then began to laugh to himself. It came out an eerie, jungle-parrot kind of laugh.

Lieutenant Anderson came into the inquiry unexpectedly, saying to Rodriguez, "Hold it a second. That sick laugh. I'm sure I've heard it before. Yes, I certainly have. It jogs my memory, Joe."

Rodriguez studied Anderson's roving eyes and lit-up face. The pilot was a new man, cut away from the semi-apathy following shock at his buddy's death; cut away from the surrealism of the drugs he had been fed in the hospital.

"Hear him before?" said Rodriguez encouragingly. "Where at?"

"Tom Grimes used to sit in the kitchen at the officers club with this man, Joe," Anderson said. "Tom told me Chavane had been cook at his fraternity house—Tau Tau Zeta on the Huntington College campus near La Jolla. If that was true, what's Chavane doing here hooked up with the North Vietnamese?"

"I can tell you—" Randall Rogers started to break in.

Anderson brushed him off, continuing, "Now it comes back to me. Tom Grimes liked to talk European politics and isms with the cook. He said that Chavane was an exchange student in Budapest in nineteen hundred and fifty-six and came to the United States ticketed as a 'Freedom Fighter' refugee. If he's on the North Vietnamese side now, then he had to be a phoney refugee when Tom knew him."

Rogers persisted, saying, "I can tell you exactly who he is. I got to know this bird pretty well on the base. But I never suspected what I found out last night, or this morning early, or whenever it was that he left me alone for a few minutes to walk down to the sentry gate.

"Look in that musette bag under the bed, Rodriguez. You'll find surprises in there, like I did. You'll find the names of everybody on Kor Nut Ratcha base he had marked out to work on—to influence or blackmail if he could—such as myself and Tom Grimes and Fred Anderson here. He's a Commie from way back, this smooth Chavane is.

"Anderson is right; he worked as a cook at some colleges. He figured the beatnik philosophies maybe influenced those kids for real. He made his lists of idealist dupes of the Reds and reported them to a top level Intelligence somewhere. That top level crowd

thought they had a bag of potential turncoats ready to use for their cause, the blockheads."

"How did he get past the Army's tests and investigations to land his cook's job?" Rodriguez asked.

Rodriguez was not yet willing to accept the Rogers story without doing his own double-checking.

"At the lower rungs there is little or no investigation," said Rogers. "I always worried about my cooks and waiters being spies or thieves. In fact, if I did anything wrong it was to let Souvanna lull me into accepting his hospitality at the Boknamo plantation. But I wasn't the only one who fell for that. There was Lieutenant Faneuil and Joanna Raymond and—"

Fred Anderson interrupted the man, saying, "It's true, Joe. There were others. I was there myself, I'm sorry to say. We got roped in, thinking it was only a fun thing to have a secret pool while the rest of the base sweltered. I soon got the feeling that something was wrong about the set-up.

"Officially, a man called Bok Nammo owned the place, but I never saw him once. Souvanna and his wife really ran it, come to think of it, with a fellow named Amnat and a Thai girl he had on the string. Lily McKimmey, the Red Cross gal, felt the same way about Boknamo, even though it was part of her job to find relaxation spots for the soldiers. She went there just

once and would never go back."

Souvanna broke in with a screechier, eerier laugh, faced around to Anderson, and said, "You're a two-way liar."

Then, to Rogers, he said, "You crummy big slob. You try to move in on my wife, playing footsie with her on jungle rides. You take a shine to the caretaker Amnat Pong, so's you can make time on that one's secretary. So you thought I was a dumb cook, eh, Rogers?"

While he was talking, Joe Rodriguez indicated to Anderson to get the musette bag under the cot. The pilot plucked the canvas bag, found it heavy with the weight of a .45 automatic pistol in addition to a leather binder crammed with papers.

Anderson passed the papers to Rodriguez.

Seeing the papers come to view, Souvanna laughed crazily again, and said, "You're wasting your time, Rodriguez. You and your friends will never get out of this stockade. It's an old Chinese trick to let the pursuer think he's caught his man, to let him come in to the trap, but not to let him ever get out.

"You didn't see the red flag over this go-down, did you? It has waved there since Dien Bien Phu fell to the People's Army. This old shack was on a flank of the last battlefield of the French defeat in nineteen-hundred and fifty-four.

It's a monument to the People's victory. You don't know it but you are surrounded right now."

Rodriguez said nothing. The words actually brought on a profound relief.

Souvanna Chavane had just unwittingly told him that their helicopter had touched down unnoticed by the guardians of this disguised information clearing house, whether it was indeed a monument or not. The guardians had not shown up to investigate and there had been plenty of time for alert police to have done so. So they had to be unnoticed up to now.

He judged in warm relief that their chances of flying out of the barricaded facility were now better than good, except for just one bad thing.

The bad thing was the weight problem of the helicopter.

Rodriguez put this problem aside for the moment in order to check the contents of the binder of papers. He now judged that he had the time.

The codes were on top of the layer. Six passports were there, made out to different Oriental names, but with always the address of "673 Blue Willow Lane, Macao" and always the photo being of Souvanna.

Then came a list of names from the military roster of Kor Nut Ratcha field.

Among the names that Souvan-

na had put down were two that made Joe smile. One was "Rosalie Anspacher," with the note, "New nurse—try get more LSD." The other was his own name, with the note, "Shave-tail promoted in the field from sergeant. Probably Spook with cover insignia."

But what settled the problem of too much weight in the helicopter was another paper; a typed report in English.

"To 673," the report was addressed, "from Hq. Macao. Advance information shows several persons who once were favorable to approved causes in certain American colleges have since defected to imperialist military beliefs. List of such persons is attached. In the course of Imperialist American war plans, some of the names will show up in Vietnam or Thailand as pilots or radar-observer co-pilots—both specialties being prime targets for elimination. You will therefore proceed to Bangkok and identify yourself as a cook with American military advisors. Use previous American background to secure civilian job. You will make connections with Americans through a subject selected for his vulnerability, Warrant Officer Randall Rogers, 439th Fighter-Bomber Wing. 439th scheduled to arrive Thailand before March.

"Use woman appeal on Rogers. He is loyal imperialist but woman-crazy moron. Use him well and

obtain access to briefing room target data by use of our newest ceramic voice pick-ups—see catalog no. 865221, under dinnerware. Our people are now completing necessary communications to link Thailand to DBP. They will set up attractive play facilities to which imperialists are accustomed and contact you in Thailand somewhere near American air base. Headquarters ZO 78.”

Rodriguez wanted to laugh at the arrogance of the Commie top brains in imagining that they could win over Americans at a luxurious playpen. But it was all too tragic to permit a smile. He could not forget Ling Mao.

LIEUTENANT ED HANLEY came back in the office room as Rodriguez to re-read the revealing orders of the organization that could be the Red Chinese Intelligence, Macao office of Southeast Asian operations.

Hanley said, “Joe, a guard walked up from the gate. That’s two hundred yards away, remember? He’s evidently curious about the chopper. He didn’t see me. But get this. Little Poc saw him coming. She said, ‘Hide. I take care.’ Then she rushed out there. She smiled at the fellow and jabbered in Vietnamese with him.

“The idea must have been she was propositioning him to drive her in to town. She’s got him turned around and heading for the

gate. We better get out, Joe. There’s no time to lose.”

“But how about Poc?” said Rodriguez. “We have to take her along, too. We have to get her back from that guard.”

“Do you?” Hanley said it incredulously. “As things stand, we can’t get over the mountain with all this weight.” He pointed to Souvanna and Rogers.

Joe Rodriguez made his decision. It was a tough one. Anyway you looked at it, it was a real tough one.

“Rogers,” Rodriguez said. “You are still under technical arrest. It’s up to you to make your peace with Commandant Kennedy later. He’ll be seeing these papers and wanting to know what you were doing at the plantation. And you’ll have to explain away the stolen goods we found in Bok Namo’s quarters. And the murder of Ling Mao in the Buddhist temple. Go along with Lieutenant Hanley. You stay here for a minute, Anderson.”

Rodriguez swung around to face Souvanna Chavane who sat on a cot, still grimacing contemptuously.

“Where is Kali, your daughter?” Rodriguez said to the man.

Chavane appeared startled at the question. Rodriguez judged that the cook had really expected the arrival of guards and his release. Now he was unnerved. And so he was, for he gave away his

daughter's location by unconsciously moving his head towards the single door into the dark go-down area.

Rodriguez signaled and Anderson raised a .45 to keep Chavane covered.

Rodriguez opened the door into the storage area. He saw then that the place had no windows. The only light was from leaks in the ill-fitting roof of corrugated tin sheets.

As he became accustomed to the murky light, he made out first, a cluster of telegraphic relay boxes, batteries, and manual generators, and second, the form of a slender girl. She seemed to be sleeping on a pile of empty jute bags.

Then he saw that the girl was Kali. She was muzzled with a yellow handkerchief stuffed in her mouth. Her ankles and wrists were tied with rope. It was possible that her father had despaired of trying to convince her to stay put in the hide-out—perhaps while he was in Dien Bien Phu military Intelligence headquarters waiting to bring back Rogers for safe-keeping. Perhaps so he could thus hide her and prevent the ploughboy sentry from molesting her. The same sentry whom pretty Poc was now twisting around her fingers.

Rodriguez called Lieutenant Anderson to the door and instructed him to carry the girl out and cut away her ropes, then set

her free and let her fend for herself.

Soon the girl and Anderson were gone. Only then did Rodriguez wave Souvanna inside the go-down storage area, jabbing him with his gun barrel.

In the stale hot air of the go-down, Joe's voice now came crackling with that peculiar tension that few men except soldiers ever experience in their lives.

"You expected some kind of a fancy trial, I guess," said Rodriguez to the impassive saffron-skinned man before him. "Well, you are going to get the same kind of treatment you gave to Tom Grimes and Colonel Wedemeyer and Ling Mao and the others.

"You tricked the pilots to take your ceramic bugs into the briefing room from the table under the banyan tree. You rigged a phone from the base to Boknamo plantation to get the target data on to the long red wires fast.

"Your home-made code and your do-it-yourself telegraph system—those added up to certain death for our pilots. You and your Red cut-throats left them with no chance in the world to live against ganged-up SAM's at the target."

Rodriguez noted that the man's eyes narrowed and that he seemed on the verge of striking back, of trying at least to divert the gun barrel sticking out at him.

That was all right with Joe Rodriguez. He preferred it that

way. He was going to kill him anyway.

It was just a little better to shoot in self-defense. At least it was better on paper when you made out your special report.

Souvanna's eyes flicked as he started the cobra out-thrust of a pudgy hand.

Lieutenant Rodriguez squeezed the trigger.

The terrific muzzle velocity of the .45 knocked Souvanna Chavane back a foot, flat onto bags of rice, dead.

Twenty minutes later in the crowded fuselage of the chopper, going over the crest of the low mountains in the harsh sunlight of mid-day, Jose Juan Rodriguez looked down on faraway Dien Bien Phu. He located the grey square of the go-down, set in its stockade. The distance was too great to discern people down there.

But he imagined that Poc Lo Nang walked on the path that showed up outside the wire stockade and that she was headed for the grey huts of Dien Bien Phu village ahead of her.

The chopper passed over the crest and the canyons of the Ou River came into view. Beyond the mountain range on the western horizon was Thailand. Rodriguez did not look that way.

He leaned against the waist gunner's bay. He saw in mind's eye the beautiful face of Poc Lo Nang as she trudged in the dust of the crooked path towards Dien Bien Phu.

For her, the path was the start of a long journey homeward. The start of days of exhausting work in fields and paddies. The start of listening to a lunatic torrent of false fun and laughs from customers in cheap cafes. The start of begging and stealing rides through myriad miles of mountain and valley jungle lands in drenching monsoons and frying heat.

Perhaps it is better that way nevertheless, thought Joe Rodriguez. She will come through to Saigon fine some day. And her heart will be happy again when she does, because she will not be thinking any more of the dilated eyes of her father Ling Mao in the temple of Gautama.



THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

DEATH TIMES THREE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

It was a tough case. Three dead men could testify to that. And somewhere in the dark a killer waited for his last victim — Mike Shayne, who alone had dared to trail him!



THE MAN WITH the rifle was lying on his stomach, sighting the weapon down a grassy slope on the lighted window of a house that was little more than a shack.

The porch was sagging, the roof in need of re-shingling, and the vegetation immediately surrounding the dwelling was a clotted mass of brambles and waist-high weeds.

Beyond the lighted window an

elderly man with sparse white hair sat in a wicker chair, reading a magazine.

He looked both impoverished and unkempt. He was wearing faded dungarees, a blue denim workshirt and hobnailed boots caked with mud.

The man with the rifle took careful aim and fired. There was a sharp crack, followed by the whine

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A new MIKE SHAYNE adventure



of a speeding bullet and a sudden shattering of glass.

The magazine fell from the old man's hands. But for the barest instant there was no other indication that the bullet had found its mark. He remained sitting bolt upright, with no change of expression until he started to slide from the chair to the floor. Then, all at once, his features twitched convulsively and his shoulders sagged. He slumped jerkily to the base of the chair with a bright gleaming in the center of his chest, fell forward from a kneeling position and flattened out on the floor. He did not move again.

The lone assassin at the top of the slope got slowly to his feet, brushing twigs from his clothes and patting the rifle with a look of grim satisfaction in his eyes.

Seemingly convinced that the house now harbored a corpse, he did not descend the slope to make absolutely sure. He turned instead and vanished into the woods.

II

THE DIGNIFIED LOOKING gray-haired man who had been ushered into Michael Shayne's private office by Lucy Hamilton waited until the door had closed behind the redhead's attractive secretary before sitting down and fumbling in his left coat pocket, presumably for a pack of cigarettes. Shayne extended his own pack quickly, with one cigarette protruding.

The gray-haired man smiled appreciatively and his hand came out of his pocket empty. He accepted the cigarette, stuck it between his lips and leaned forward across the desk until the tip was in contact with the flame of an abruptly clicked-on lighter.

The detective snapped the lighter shut, and stared at his caller speculatively for a moment. "How can I be of help to you, Mr. Beamont?" he said.

Shayne paused an instant to stare at the intercom over which Lucy's voice had come a few minutes previously, then went on without waiting for a reply. "Miss Hamilton informed me it concerns the disappearance—and possibly fatal shooting—of Thomas Bentley. There appears to be little doubt that he was shot before he vanished, unless someone else was sitting in the path of the bullet. And that seems unlikely."

Shayne tapped the folded newspaper at his elbow, which he had bought before arriving at his office.

"A photograph makes more of an impression than a name," he said, his eyes on the almost inch-high headlines, "even when it's that of a prominent industrialist who gets into the news quite often. Barring a few late sleepers, I imagine everyone in Miami knows who you are by now."

A pained look came into Frank Beamont's eyes. "I'm not exactly happy about that," he said. "But I

suppose it can't be avoided, when something like this happens."

"Unexpected publicity seldom sets well with anyone," Shayne said. "I've had my share of it."

"My recent publicity is different," Beamont said. "But the publicity you've received is based on a very solid kind of accomplishment. I wouldn't be here otherwise."

"Well—" Shayne said, grinning. "There may be a few press notices I've read without wanting to sue the newspapers for libel. But that's as far as I'll go in commending them."

For an instant Beamont grinned. Then the grin vanished and his face set in grim lines.

"I've come from Chief Gentry's office," he said. "He impressed me as being competent enough; within certain narrow limits. But I had the feeling that the police haven't the remotest idea where to start looking for Bentley—assuming, of course, that he's still alive."

Beamont paused an instant, then said: "It's damned strange, in a way. Not only Bentley's disappearance, but the number of people who know what kind of clothes he wears and the kind of house he lives in. I guess if you're really a *somebody*, no matter how eccentric you are, the news leaks out and takes firm hold of the popular mind.

"Even his habit of commuting by bicycle between a run-down house, and a hundred million dol-

lar industrial plant turning out highly specialized naval instruments under government contract is pretty generally known. Nothing, apparently, can hide his kind of inventive genius. I'm supposed to be a fairly wealthy man. But Thomas Bentley could buy and sell me a dozen times over."

"That's what puzzles me," Shayne said abruptly. "Why didn't someone—you, for instance—provide him with protection? He should have had a bodyguard, no matter how much he squawked."

"This is a free country," Beamont said. "How can you force a brilliant, enormously wealthy man to surrender the value he may chose to place on absolute privacy? To have him committed, he'd have to be psychotic, which he isn't. Anyway, for us to lose him would be disastrous. The likelihood of his still being alive seems remote. We don't know that he's dead, of course, and as long as a faint hope remains—"

Shayne tapped the folded newspaper again. "This suggests that Gentry has been talking. Merely to check—you sent someone over from the plant late yesterday afternoon, to find out why Bentley didn't keep a three o'clock appointment with you. Right?"

Beamont nodded. "Yes. We had some important matters to discuss. He comes to the plant three days a week, arriving at ten in the morning with clocklike regularity. But

Mondays and Fridays he doesn't come in unless I phone him. He was supposed to arrive at three. I waited a half hour before I tried to get him on the phone again. It kept ringing."

"The bullet buried in the wall behind the chair in which he must have been sitting tells us more than the shattered window pane and the blood on the floor," Shayne said. "If it passed right through him the chances are fairly certain that the wound was a fatal. That would depend on whether it pierced a vital organ. It's also possible that the bullet grazed him. Slight wounds sometimes bleed profusely."

Shayne's bushy red eyebrows contracted. "Tell me—did Gentry mention finding anything at all outside of the house? There's nothing in the paper about that."

Beamont shook his head. "He asked me a great many questions. But I couldn't get very much out of him."

The look of concern in Beamont's eyes deepened. He crushed out his cigarette and leaned sharply forward, extracting another one from the pack on Shayne's desk. The redhead repeated his courtesy gesture of lighting it for him and waited for him to go on, his eyebrows still contracted.

"Gentry knows how big this is," Beamont said. "I kept nothing back, laid it straight on the line. Besides, he had every right to know. A Police Chief may not be

entitled to secret weapon information, even in a possible homicide case. But that would apply only to the technical aspects of the device. Bentley was working to perfect."

"How big is it?" Mike Shayne asked.

"Well, Bentley would have to perfect it before it would be of any value to anyone," Beamont said. But his failure to do so would be a kind of time-bomb in reverse, since it would deprive the United States of a priceless military asset at a time when it could be used to the best possible advantage."

"Then isn't this a case for the F.B.I. or the Central Intelligence Agency?" Shayne asked.

"The F.B.I. will be called in, you can be sure of that," Beamont said.

"The possible kidnaping angle alone makes that inevitable. But we haven't been working on this particular device under government contract. It was never our intention to offer it to the Pentagon before Bentley gave us a go-ahead nod. If he doesn't perfect it—and no one else can—all of the money we've sunk in it will go down the drain, along with Beamont, Incorporated. Our present government contracts aren't large enough to save us."

"Can you tell me more about it," Shayne said, "than you've told Gentry? If the Pentagon hasn't been briefed, it can't be classified information."

"No, of course not. But I wish now that it were. All right, it's a naval device, a ship-to-shore installation that makes possible a target-area accuracy surpassing anything that's now operational. I told Gentry that much. If you'll wheel in a blackboard and give me a piece of chalk—"

"That's hardly necessary—right at the moment," Shayne said. He tugged at his left earlobe and remained for an instant silent, his gaze returning to the folded newspaper.

"Very well," the redhead said. "You want me to find Thomas Bentley before Gentry gets around to making a stab at locating him—a stab which you feel might do more harm than good. Is that right?"

Beamont nodded. "It's not the easiest thing in the world to locate a man who has vanished without leaving a trace after being wounded, perhaps fatally, with a bullet from a high-powered rifle," he said. "I fully realize that."

"Well," Shayne said, "I'll see what I can do."

"That's the only good news I've received so far," Beamont said. "I was afraid you might refuse."

III

MIKE SHAYNE parked his car on a narrow dirt road a quarter of a mile from Thomas Bentley's ramshackle house and approached the isolated dwelling through the



woods, over a zigzagging foot-path deeply rutted with bicycle tracks. Since it would have been impossible for Bentley to have traveled from the road to the house on his bicycle, the elderly inventor had apparently been in the habit of dismounting and wheeling the vehicle along on foot, guiding it over the bumps by keeping a tight grip on the handle bars.

With the investigation less than a day old the house, Shayne knew, would be guarded. Gentry had probably stationed only a few men about the place—possibly no more than two—to keep it under surveillance. And that meant searching the woods for a carelessly over-

looked clue as to the bullet-firer's identity would expose Shayne to only one danger—the possibility that he might be mistaken for a suspicious prowler and get himself shot at before his identity could be established.

The sensible thing would have been to go straight to Will Gentry and get permission to explore the premises. But that would have meant tipping his hand, however slightly, and the circumstances surrounding Bentley's disappearance were too unusual to make that kind of a deal seem promising. Besides, he had very little so far to bargain with, and this was a case where quick results in the form of tangible evidence were of the utmost importance.

It was hard to believe that whoever had fired a bullet at Bentley would have made his way out of the woods by slashing away at the dense underbrush. The actual abduction of Bentley would have made the use of the footpath mandatory. But before searching along the path Mike Shayne decided to get as close as possible to the house and estimate his chances of avoiding discovery.

Shayne had followed the footpath for close to a hundred feet and was pausing to loosen his tie when he heard a twig crackle sharply directly behind him. Abruptly he swung about, but not quickly enough to avoid a rocklike fist that thudded into the small of

his back and sent him hurtling forward.

He crashed to the path, rolled over and tried to get up. But the blow had caused a sudden wave of dizziness to sweep over him, along with sickening pain.

He was barely able to hurl himself sideways, away from the path and another blow, a descending one this time. All it did was graze his shoulder, but he could still feel the power behind it.

Hovering over Shayne was a goggle-eyed frog shape with long, swinging arms terminating in massive fists. In one of the fists there was a metallic glitter, and as Shayne tried again to get to his feet the knife started to slant downwards until it was pointing directly at the redhead's throat.

Then he saw his assailant, a tall man clad like a skin diver, except that there were no webbed flippers on his feet and part of the snorkel-like look seemed to be missing from the outfit as a whole. The goggles were very large and almost completely covered his face. But what he was wearing was clearly a part of an outfit which had been modified, both for purposes of disguise and for walking and killing on dry land.

The dizziness began to pass and Mike Shayne suddenly knew that he could get up. But he waited an instant before attempting it, his eyes fastened on the knife, measuring in his mind the split seconds it

would take the weapon to descend and bury itself in his throat.

One second—two—three. He must be completely sure that his strength wouldn't fail him and that his reflexes would be in no danger of betraying him.

The knife was a foot from his throat when he sprang up with a furious surge of his heavy bulk, and slammed his elbow into the frogman's groin. Then he was gripping the man's wrist, ignoring his groan of anguish, and twisting it savagely. Backward and forward they swayed for an instant; then the knife went clattering to the footpath. The frog-shaped man's eyes rolled.

At that moment Shayne's dizziness returned, making him feel that he was in danger of blacking out. But the frogman was either completely unaware of that, or was in no condition to take advantage of it. Without making any attempt to regain the knife, he swung about and went plunging away through the underbrush.

For almost a full minute Shayne could hear the crackling of the vegetation as the man continued to flee through the woods, while he stood swaying on his feet.

Suddenly the dizziness was gone. Still swaying a little, Shayne bent and picked up the knife. It had a five-inch blade and a curiously ornamental handle—a dragon embossed on a corrugated black surface that glimmered redly in the

sunlight, a dragon with a darting tongue of flame.

Buried in a shark's belly the dragon dagger would have done a lot of damage. He was sure that the frogman would have been just as pleased to see it buried in a private detective's throat.

Shayne had to fight against an impulse to be satisfied with what he had, return to the road and drive back to the city for a talk with Will Gentry. But he decided that, having gone so far, it would be foolish indeed not to get a look at Bentley's house, if only from the edge of the clearing surrounding it.

Pocketing the knife—the handle protruded three inches above his coat pocket—he continued on along the footpath, taking care to avoid stepping on too many brittle twigs.

IV

FRANK BEAUMONT had described the house in detail, as well as the surrounding stretch of woods. The place was even more ramshackle than Shayne had imagined that it would be.

Why a man of Bentley's brilliance and wealth should have chosen to reside in such a shack made no sense at all to Mike Shayne—until he remembered how common that kind of eccentricity was among not a few men of creative genius.

What startled Shayne the most

about the house was its stillness. The entire clearing was wrapped in a silence that seemed unnatural. It was vaguely disquieting, as well as startling.

Perhaps, Shayne told himself, the men whom Gentry could have hardly failed to station in the house had fallen asleep from the sheer monotony of being forced to keep a tedious vigil. But that seemed unlikely. Gentry's men were good. They would almost certainly be moving about, brewing coffee or discussing Miami police headaches.

And that was just the point. None of the window-shades was lowered, but there was no sign of movement from one part of the house to another.

Shayne carefully descended the slope as quickly as possible and moved up into the shadows beneath one of the windows. He raised his head to eye-level and looked in at a kitchen that was surprisingly clean and well-ordered. There were copper kettles on the stove and a gleaming array of aluminum pots and pans ranged along one wall, and a much larger refrigerator than Bentley would have needed to store a bachelor-hermit's edibles.

Shayne left that particular window after a moment's inspection and moved on to another. Looking in, his body went suddenly rigid, and he continued to stare for ten seconds before making a dash for

the rear door of the shack, with all of his caution abandoned.

The door was ajar and Mike Shayne passed quickly into the house and shut it firmly behind him.

Gentry had evidently stationed only two men to guard the house, but they were no longer doing so. One lay sprawled out on the floor with an uncradled telephone receiver tightly clasped in his death-stiffened fingers. There was a bullet hole in the middle of his back with a wide circle of red surrounding it. He must have been shot while attempting to phone and came close to upsetting the table as he'd crashed to the floor with the receiver in his clasp.

The second detective was sitting upright against the wall on the far side of the living room. He had apparently been shot twice, possibly three times, for his chest was gruesomely shredded and his face was a gleaming scarlet horror, totally unrecognizable.

One thing was immediately clear to Mike Shayne. Whoever had abducted Bentley, whether dead or still alive, had returned to the cottage to take care of some unfinished business. And he hadn't wanted the two detectives to say anything on the phone about it to the Miami Police Chief.

Shayne stood very still, going over it in his mind, wondering if that was the complete explanation. He had looked upon death by violence too often to be seriously

shaken, but the murdered man by the wall made him wish for a moment that he was outside the house again in the bright sunlight.

Shayne bent and began to pry the phone from the stiffened fingers of the sprawled figure on the floor.

IV

WILL GENTRY, Miami Chief of Police, sat quietly at his desk and looked at Mike Shayne. There was something in that look that the redhead didn't quite like.

Gentry was chewing on an unlighted cigar and drumming lightly on the desk with his fingers. "If you'd come to me straight off, Mike," he said, "we could have worked together on this, and saved you a lot of trouble. Beamont told you more than he told me—I don't hold it against him—Or maybe I do."

Gentry sighed, picked up his cigar, stuck it in the corner of his mouth and set it down again.

"We've found Thomas Bentley and the man who killed him is downstairs in a cell. And what are you going to tell Frank Beamont when he knows that he went to you quite unnecessarily?"

"I'll admit," he said, after a pause, "that what you've told me about the attack of the frogman on you helps. It's the clincher we've been hoping for. No, I shouldn't say that, because we've got enough already to send him to the chair



Lucy Hamilton

seven times over. Bentley's body found in his home, the wild story he'd been telling to everyone who will listen, other things. But that frogman story helps."

"I should think it would," Shayne said dryly. "If what you've told me about him is true."

"A playboy and a skin diver and Bentley's nephew to boot. Wilmore stands to inherit all of Bentley's money in an iron-clad will," Gentry said, nodding. "What more could you ask?"

"So young Wilmore is your man, you feel? You're absolutely sure of it—in spite of the fact that Bentley was working on a secret naval installation which every Iron Curtain secret agent would like to get his hands on, particularly in view of how valuable it would be in Vietnam? Of course—"

"Look, Mike," Gentry said, spreading his palms, "do we have to go around making a James Bond thing out of every private inheri-

tance killing on the books? To me the naval device you're so hot and bothered about was simply a coincidence in this case. The evidence against Wilmore is overwhelming. His wild story is practically a confession in itself."

"Would you mind," Shayne asked, "if I had a talk with Wilmore? Or is he being held *incommunicado*?"

"You know better than that, Mike," Gentry said. "We haven't stepped an inch out of line. He's been advised of all of his rights!"

"I can see him then?"

"I'm not sure that would come under the heading of one of his rights," Gentry said. "But why not? I owe you that much, Mike. If you hadn't gone to Bentley's house when you did and phoned me so promptly—"

"I don't think the killer would have returned a third time," Shayne said. "He'd have had plenty of time to get what he came back for with Fisher and Grennon lying dead on the floor."

"I'm still grateful," Gentry said. "They might be lying there now, if you hadn't phoned. They were not to phone unless they saw someone lurking about the house. That someone might have been you, Mike. I'm glad that you didn't get yourself shot at."

"Thanks a lot, Will," Shayne said, grinning. "Can I talk to Wilmore now? What's his full name, by the way?"

"Well, we've got both the killer and the abductor now," Gentry said. "And he's one man. His full name is Percy Archibald Wilmore, believe it or not. And now is as good a time as any for you to have a talk with him."

VI

PERCY ARCHIBALD WILMORE arose from the narrow iron cot in his cell the instant Mike Shayne and Chief Gentry appeared at the door, a look of startlement in his eyes.

Shayne had the feeling the youth had recognized him instantly, but he wasn't sure until Wilmore asked: "You're the private detective, Mike Shayne, aren't you? I've seen your picture—"

"That's right," Shayne said, quickly, cutting him short. "My picture gets around."

Gentry explained the reason for the visit, opened and closed the door of the cell and took his departure, leaving the redhead sitting on the cot by the young man's side.

Shayne began without preamble, feeling there was nothing to be gained by letting Wilmore know just how much Gentry had told him.

"I understand that your uncle was found dead in your home," Shayne said. "Let's use that as a starter. You'll have to go back a bit, of course. Suppose you begin by telling me exactly how he got there."

"I brought him there," Wilmore said. "You see, Mr. Shayne, I usually dropped in at my uncle's house once a week—seldom oftener. Friday was the day I usually picked, because he didn't go to the plant on Fridays, and I knew I could count on finding him at home.

"I got there a little before three and the back door was ajar, so I went in without knocking. He was standing up in the living room, leaning back against the fireplace and he looked—ghastly. I could see at once that he was badly wounded, but I didn't know how serious it was and he refused to tell me. He'd managed to bandage the wound himself, and the instant he saw me he grabbed me by the arm and pleaded with me not to phone for an ambulance but to take him to my house. I live in the city, as I'm sure you know by now."

Shayne nodded. "Yes, Gentry told me where the arrest was made," he said.

"Well, he told me that he was in danger, that he didn't want to stay in his house a moment longer, and that he had a lot of things to think over and an important decision to make. He always liked and trusted me, Mr. Shayne."

"So you let him persuade you," Shayne said, "when he should have been rushed to a hospital. Why did you agree to do anything so foolish and so dangerous?"

"I told you," Wilmore said. "I had no way of knowing how close



to death he was, since he could stand and walk. He even climbed on his bicycle and let me help him to get to the road without walking. I walked alongside and helped wheel the bicycle over the footpath that leads from his house to the road. I had to keep steadying it and it wasn't easy. Once he almost fell off, when the bicycle struck a flat rock covered with leaves and started to overturn."

Shayne grunted. "He must have been off his rocker."

Wilmore shook his head. "No, Mr. Shayne. My uncle was not insane. But he was a strong-willed, very eccentric man. You couldn't reason with him when he made up his mind about anything that seemed important to him. I knew better than to try—except that I *would* have phoned a hospital if

I'd known how critical his condition was."

"And when you reached the road?" Shayne asked.

"I helped him into my car and drove home."

"And took the bicycle with you. It wasn't found by the police. If it had been it would be a strong point in your favor, might help clear you. Except that you could have used it to take your uncle to the car if you'd shot him dead."

It was a double-edged question and Shayne had phrased it that way deliberately, while he watched Wilmore's face. It seemed to him that Wilmore had paled slightly.

"He was very fond of that bicycle, Mr. Shayne," Wilmore said."

"You told Gentry he didn't live long after you brought him to your house," Shayne said. "About how long?"

"Nearly twenty hours." Wilmore said, a stricken look coming into his eyes. "He just got weaker and weaker. Even then I didn't realize he was dying. Once he asked for a pencil and paper and tried to write, but he was too weak to hold the pencil. It dropped out of his hand. I left the room for a moment and when I came back he was gone."

"But you didn't phone the police?"

"I don't know why I didn't. I knew I'd have to within a few hours. But it was a terrible shock to me and I kept putting it off."

"But you knew he'd been shot.

Didn't you think it was your duty to report that fact, since his death freed you of every obligation not to? You should have reported it earlier, while he was still alive. You should have phoned a hospital and notified the police as well, no matter what he said. Of course, the hospital would have done that anyway."

A sudden change came over Wilmore. His hand went out and gripped Shayne's arm. There was a surprising strength in the grip and Shayne's eyes lingered for an instant on the youth's hands. They were quite strong, decidedly muscular looking hands.

"Look, Mr. Shayne," Wilmore said. "If I had shot him, as Gentry claims, would I have waited for the police to arrive? Being his nephew, I would have known they had my address, and might arrive at any moment. Wouldn't I have cleared out fast? And why would I have taken him to my home anyway? Wouldn't that have been a senseless thing to do?"

"Maybe," Shayne said. "But he was, after all, found dead in your house, killed by a bullet from a gun. Tell me something. Do you go skin-diving often?"

"Do I? Why, yes, it's a hobby of mine. What has that to do—"

"More than you may suspect. Do you own a knife—I suppose it could serve as a fish-knife—with a small red dragon embossed on it?"

Wilmore shook his head. "No, I

haven't got a knife like that. I don't like knives, even hunting knives. But a skin-diver has to use them—"

Shayne stood up. "All right," he said. "You've helped me a lot. I'd like to have another talk with you. But that can wait."

The look of pleading had not left Wilmore's eyes. "Are you going to try to clear me, Mr. Shayne? I had nothing to do with his death."

"He might still be alive if you'd phoned for an ambulance instead of taking him to your house," Shayne said, not trying to keep the harshness out of his voice. "But we'll see."

VII

MIKE SHAYNE spent the next five hours driving around Miami, with brief stopovers at buildings where statistical records of recent financial transactions were on file and could be consulted by the public at large. In a few instances a small amount of red tape had to be cut. Twice his name and reputation gained him interviews on the industrial-secrecy level which he might not otherwise have procured.

It was quite late when he arrived at his office, and was informed by Lucy Hamilton that Frank Beaumont had called and would be returning in fifteen minutes.

"He went out to get a cigar, I think," Lucy said. "Or perhaps a drink. He seemed nervous."



"He smokes cigarettes," Shayne said. "But in weather as sultry as this waiting in an office would make anyone restless. I phoned him earlier, and asked him to call. He said he would, at four-thirty. It must be about that now. When he arrives send him right in. Don't bother to buzz."

Shayne strode into the inner office, shut the door firmly behind him and sat down at his desk. Five minutes later the door opened, and Frank Beaumont walked into the office.

"I'm glad the pressure has eased enough for both of us to make a quite long talk possible," he said, sitting down opposite Mike Shayne. He paused to light a cigarette, this time one of his own from a crumpled pack and took a few quick puffs before continuing.

"I want you to know that I'm very grateful for the risks you took for, I'm afraid, a not too calmly sensible client," he said. "I was pretty agitated when I came to you, and that must be my excuse for pleading with you to bypass the police entirely. Gentry is efficient.

I know that now. He has told me how much you've helped him. He thinks highly of you."

"I think highly of him too," Shayne said. "He has helped me as well. Together we've succeeded in building up a pretty strong case. I doubt if there is now a single flaw in it."

"You mean there's no possibility that Wilmore will be acquitted?"

"I didn't say that," Shayne said. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm going to construct an imaginary line of evidence and I'll be interested in getting your reaction. With your help, we should be able to make sure there won't be anything a jury would have difficulty in believing."

"Of course," Beamont said quickly. "If I can help in any way—"

"You can," Shayne said, just as quickly. "We won't call him Wilmore, just Mr. X. In a theoretical reconstruction it's best not to use—well, real name labels. They can be misleading."

He paused an instant, then went on more slowly. "I'm going to postpone the motivation factor for a moment. Just let's say that Mr. X has good and sufficient reason for not wanting Thomas Bentley to go on living."

"He goes to Bentley's house with a rifle and shoots him, probably from the top of the grassy slope where the woods end. He sees Bentley fall from his chair

and since he's a good marksman he feels certain that Bentley is dead. He doesn't go down to the house to make sure. A non-professional killer might well have only one thought at such a moment—to get away from the house as quickly as possible. Deliberate, cold-blooded murder is a pretty awful thing. He'd be gripped by fear to some extent, no matter how cold-blooded he was.

"The possibility that Bentley may not have been killed doesn't seriously worry him—until he reads in the morning paper that Bentley's 'body' has vanished. Then he becomes genuinely alarmed. If Bentley is still alive he may talk, because Mr. X knows that Bentley has known for some time that Mr. X doesn't want him to go on living. Bentley knows the reason for that as well, knows exactly why Mr. X might be capable of shooting him down in cold blood.

"What if Bentley has left, concealed somewhere in the house—but certain to be found eventually—a written statement of some kind, that would point an accusing finger at Mr. X? The likelihood of that might not be too great, but remember—Mr. X has committed murder and is not exactly in a composed frame of mind.

"He feels he must go back to the cottage and make sure. He realizes there will be police stationed there, but even that doesn't

deter him. His main purpose may be simply to eavesdrop, to find out what he can. He can't rest without doing something to find out if the police have discovered anything in the house that could become courtroom evidence of a very damning nature."

Shayne removed a cigarette from the pack on his desk and lit it. He looked at Beamont inquiringly before continuing but the industrialist did not seem disposed to ask a single question.

"Mr. X wore a very ingenious disguise—not in the least bulky, a disguise that could be carried in a paper bag and put on very quickly. Part of a costume, you might call it—but it disguised him very effectively.

"Now this is something I found out from Gentry. When Wilmore—we have to use his name here—took Bentley to his home he lived for less than twenty hours. During all that time he kept muttering he had a decision to make. Once he asked Wilmore for paper and pencil. But he was too weak to hold the pencil and it dropped from his fingers.

"But Bentley was seemingly not too weak to make a phone call. At the end he summoned enough strength to uncradle the receiver at his bedside and put through a call to the house he'd left with Wilmore's help. The phone was found uncradled when Wilmore was arrested. Wilmore had simply failed

to notice it, not surprising in view of his agitation.

"It fits together, doesn't it? Mr. X has crept up to the house and is staring in through an opened window, watching one of the two men whom Gentry stationed there take that call. The policeman wasn't trying to phone when he was shot, he was taking a call from Bentley.

"Why Bentley should have chosen to phone the house instead of police headquarters is anybody's guess, but it's not hard to understand. He must have been sure there'd be policemen there, and getting a call through to the house would have been easier for him than trying to get the Chief of Police on the phone.

"We don't know what Bentley said on the phone, but what the taker of that call said to his companion while Mr. X was eavesdropping must have convinced Mr. X that it was necessary to shoot them both dead.

"Mr. X seems to have been a highly nervous individual, who panicked easily. He must have had the gun with him but he used a knife instead when he saw me in the woods and decided he didn't want me to go on to the house and find what a ghastly shambles he'd made of it."

Shayne sighed. "That was his big mistake. When I elbowed him in the groin he dropped the knife. There's a red dragon embossed on the hilt and that's the distinctive

emblem of a skin divers' club, and Mr. X is a member."

Shayne was looking at Frank Beamont steadily. "Now we come to the motivation I said I'd get around to. Mr. X had sunk more money in Bentley's invention than anyone suspected. He even had to steal from his own corporation to enable Bentley to perfect it. And Bentley had confided to him that he might never succeed in perfecting it.

"That was bad: it meant that Mr. X was facing ruin. But if Bentley was killed, no one could prove that the invention couldn't be perfected. And there were Iron Curtain agents who could be easily persuaded the invention was at least four-fifths operational, and a lot could be done with it. One other thing. You said Bentley was killed with a *high-powered* rifle. How did you know whether it was high-powered or not?"

Shayne made an impatient gesture. He went on, "I get damned mad, Beamont, when a client turns

killer. Why the hell you came to me in the first place I can only guess at. You weren't sure Bentley was dead and if he were still alive you hoped I'd lead you to him. You wanted another shot at Bentley before Gentry could talk to him. And I—"

Suddenly Beamont was out of his chair faster than Mike Shayne had thought possible. But it didn't worry the redhead too much, for he got around the desk fast too, and doubled the industrialist up as easily as he had in the woods.

Beamont was on the floor, groaning, when the door opened and Will Gentry and two plainclothesmen strode into the room.

"You said we might hear a slight scuffling around, Mike," Gentry said, as one of the detectives bent and snapped handcuffs on Beamont's wrists. "And then again—maybe not. But I knew you'd buzz if you needed us. We let five minutes go by before we got out of the car and followed Beamont inside, as you advised."

MIKE SHAYNE Leads Next Issue With—

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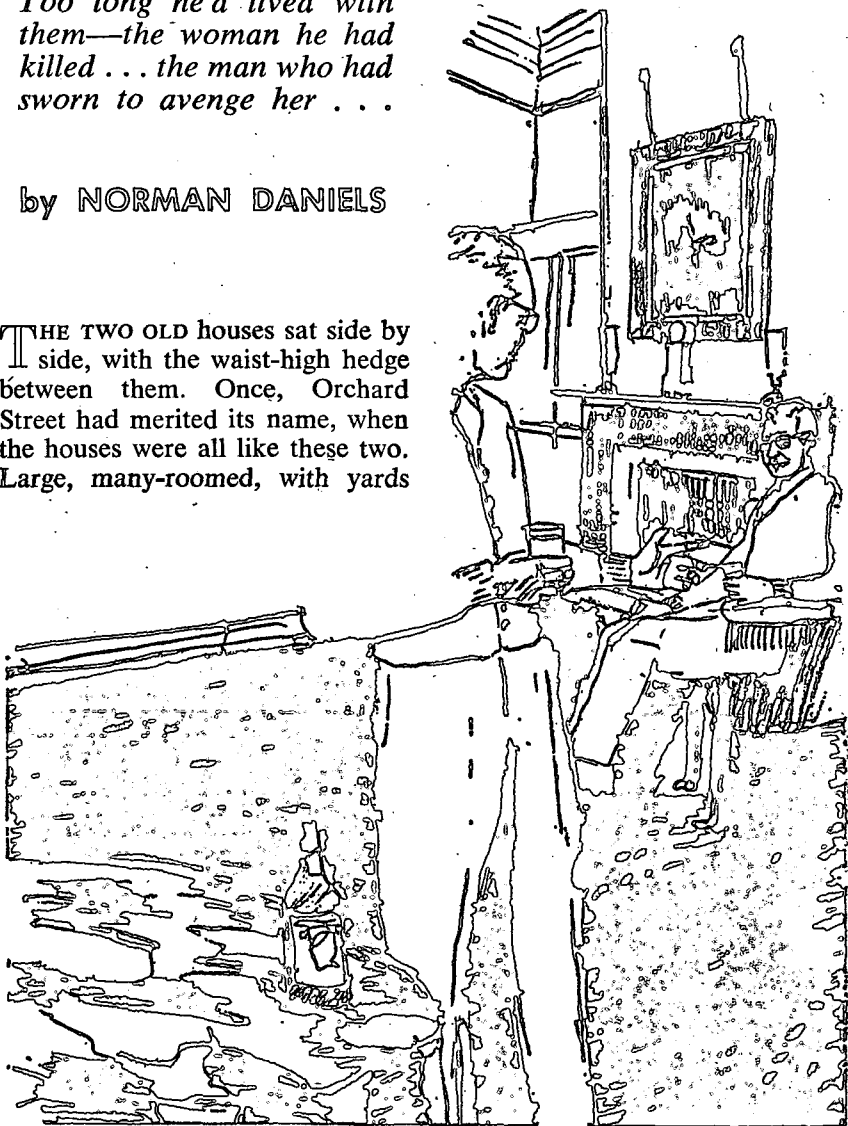
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SHE WOULDN'T GO AWAY

Too long he'd lived with them—the woman he had killed . . . the man who had sworn to avenge her . . .

by NORMAN DANIELS

THE TWO OLD houses sat side by side, with the waist-high hedge between them. Once, Orchard Street had merited its name, when the houses were all like these two. Large, many-roomed, with yards



where an oak had space to spread its branches.

The neighborhood had changed now, given way to smaller houses, on postage stamp lots. Old Mrs. Govern, just half a block away, had sold her ancient house for not quite thirty times what it had cost her husband to build it sixty-five years ago. And the new owner had aimed a steam shovel at it, brought the house down—it took a full day to do it, the way that house was put up—because all the owner wanted was the land.

The Collins place and the Scanlon place. Those were the names given the two houses from the first. They were great old places with gables, four chimneys, a rambling porch, a back veranda big enough to be used as a sleeping room. They were the relics of the old, wonderful days.

Wallace Collins, at sixty-nine, looked twenty years younger. Though not a big man, he was lithely built. His hair was a shock of unruly white; his cheeks were unwrinkled and had a pinkish glow of health.

He walked from his house to where the hedge had been trimmed down to form a passage. He stepped through this and looked at Scanlon's place. It was a sorry sight. The east end of the back veranda was sagging badly. That meant termites or plain rot. His foot stepped on a bit of ancient shingle which cracked under his weight.

Yes, the roof was peeling off slowly. One good New England hurricane, like those in 1955, and there'd be no roof left. Perhaps not even a house left. Wallace Collins moved toward the back door and felt as if he were on his way to a funeral.

Scanlon let him in at once, as if he'd been waiting just inside the kitchen door, and offered his hand, as he always did. August Scanlon, two years younger than Collins, looked ten years older. He had the stoop of the aged, and the lines, but his grip was firm enough and the hand didn't tremble.

Scanlon took down the two tall sixteen ounce glasses and carefully measured the ounce of whiskey into each. He added the ice and soda, handed one to Collins and they walked to the living room. It had a musty odor.

"Sit down, my old friend," Scanlon said. "My old, old friend."

Collins chuckled, sipped his drink, wisely remained silent. He had learned, long ago, that a man who shows patience gets what he goes after much more surely than the shouting, ranting man.

"Well," Scanlon went on, "you've won, after all."

"Have I?" Collins asked quietly. "You know very well that I'd confess some day, didn't you?"

"I hoped you would, Augie."

Scanlon looked around the room.

"They came to see me yesterday. They told me unless I made

the repairs on this house within the next three days—started them, at least—they would begin condemnation proceedings.”

“You’ve let the place go,” Collins reminded him gently.

“I haven’t had enough money to maintain it,” Scanlon said. “Not like you. The pension a retired captain of detectives gets, can keep a man comfortably. I didn’t have any pension. My social security just keeps me in food and an occasional bottle of whiskey. Oh, I could ask my two sons and my daughter to help. They would in a minute, but I won’t do that.”

“Commendable,” Collins said. “If you’re going to ask me to loan you the money, I won’t do it.”

“I know. It’s all right, Wally. The end was bound to come. You’re a relentless old bloodhound. I thought you’d have worn your nose off on this trail long ago but, if anything, it’s a bit longer.”

Collins smiled. “Thirty-four years ago your wife disappeared. I was a sergeant then and, being your next door neighbor, I was assigned to the case. Of course, I know very well you murdered her, Augie.”

“But it took you thirty-four years to prove it,” Scanlon said. “As a matter of fact, you haven’t proven it yet. You’ve just hounded me into admitting it.”

Collins set his glass down carefully on the coaster. “You knew I never gave up, didn’t you?”

“I hoped you might, when they retired you.”

“No, Augie. That only intensified my determination. I came to realize I didn’t have much time left and, therefore, I had to get the job done.”

“Shall I tell you about it?” Scanlon asked.

“Yes, Augie. I’ve waited a long time.”

“There really wasn’t much to it. You remember Minnie, of course.” He smiled wryly. “Who could forget Minnie? She had the shrillest voice and the most vile temper of any woman who ever lived. I stood it until the kids were grown. I stood it until I thought I’d go mad. Then I killed her. There was no premeditation, no planning. Unless you call ever-growing hatred premeditation.”

Collins settled back comfortably. “Be sure you realize what you’re doing, Augie. I’m retired, but a cop is always a cop. I spent half my life on this case, from time to time, and it’s still open on the books. The only murder case I ever failed to solve. The only one I left behind.”

“You were too smart, Wally. The thing was too close to you. What lay directly under your eyes, you couldn’t see.”

“She’s buried in this house,” Collins said.

“Yes, she’s here. That’s why you sent the electrical inspectors here, and the plumbing inspector

and the safety commission. You wanted the house condemned so it would be torn down and you'd find what you were looking for.

"She's been here most all this time, Wally. She's lived with me. I killed her, but she didn't go away. I had to stay here, in this crumbling old barn, because I didn't dare move. My kids think I'm crazy. Bill, my oldest son, is doing very well in California. He's been after me for years to go there and live with him, but I had to stay here."

Collins said softly, "I'm sorry. I mean that. I'm genuinely sorry, August, this all had to come out, but then, we both knew it would. Tell me—when did you kill her?"

"January third, nineteen hundred and thirty-two. Blame it on the depression. She couldn't stand bills, but she could scream at them."

"I was away, in Florida," Collins said, thinking back. "I knew it had to be then."

"The kids still believe she just went away. The publicity won't do them any good, Wally." He brushed a hand over his eyes. "I know what you're thinking. I should have thought of that thirty-seven years ago, at eight o'clock in the evening."

"I'd like another drink," Collins said.

"We're a couple of hell-roarers tonight," Scanlon said. "One ounce, once a day. That's what our doctor told us. It's strange we both

have the same type of heart condition. Of course I'll fetch another drink. Why not?"

He picked up the two glasses far down, so his fingers wouldn't get close to the drinking edges. Collins remembered how Minnie used to harp on that. 'Fingers are covered with germs, August. Especially your fingers, August, which grub in the dirt instead of being the nice, clean, smooth hands of a gentleman.' Collins could almost hear her talking. As Scanlon had said, she never really left the house.

Scanlon came back with the drinks. "It was a dirty trick, old friend," he said with a smile. "As a detective, you should have ferretted out the truth. Instead of that, you worked behind the scenes, fixing things, until I was backed into a corner."

"Again, I'm sorry," Collins said. "We searched this house. We all but took it apart, Augie. We dug up the cellar and the yard. Tell me, where was she?"

Scanlon laughed and sipped his drink. "If the events surrounding the situation hadn't been so grim, I'd have enjoyed myself. You used to tell me I was the calmest man you'd ever met."

"Calmest murderer," Collins corrected him.

"Yes, murderer. While you were digging up my yard and my cellar, you missed the one place where Minnie was quietly rotting away. You must have looked at the spot

no less than twice a day. You were within a shovel's length of her, hundreds of times."

The old hound dog in Collins itched again. Answers—there had to be answers to everything. This question was thirty-seven years old. The answer was here now.

Scanlon laughed. It occurred to Collins that he hadn't heard his old friend and neighbor laugh in many, many years. "You were in Florida, with your whole family. I merely put Minnie in a trunk, placed the trunk on a wheel barrow and wheeled it over the frozen ground to your house, old friend. I was tending your furnace while you were away, remember? So the pipes wouldn't freeze."

"You buried her in my cellar," Collins marvelled. "Wonderful, Augie. Clever, resourceful."

"I shoveled your coal bin out, dug a very deep hole, filled it in, carted off the excess earth, put the coal back. All eight tons of it, and then I cleaned up. I had all the time in the world."

"And the following year you moved her," Collins said, with a shake of his head.

"You were away again; the conditions were identical. I put her under my coal bin. I used the surplus earth from the grave to fill in the old grave in your cellar. It was gruesome. It made me quite ill, as a matter of fact, but it was also necessary. I didn't want to die then. Or go to prison."



"At least," Collins observed, "I had a worthy opponent."

Scanlon put his head back, making sure it rested on the lace covering so the chair wouldn't become stained by the oil from his hair. Minnie used to shrilly remind him of that too.

"I out-manuevered you," Scanlon said, with some pride. "You were supposed to be about the best detective on the force, but you never even came close. Without the body, you had no case, so all I had to do was keep it hidden. But I didn't escape entirely, Wally."

"I saved my precious skin from a scorching in prison, and I was a free man, to a certain extent, but I had a jailer too. She was here. I could never leave. I might close and lock the door when I went out, but I had to return. Sometimes, I was sure I could hear her laughing, but of course, it was only imagination."

"Or memory," Collins said. "I remember her laugh too."

"She really enjoyed herself when someone was in trouble, didn't she? I killed her, but she wouldn't go away. And all the while, you were next door. A conscientious man with an ability to ferret out the truth, to run down facts, to establish evidence. Did you know, Wally, there were times when I thought about killing you?"

"Yes, you would have," Collins said. "Self-preservation is a powerful stimulant."

"Not as powerful as you might believe," Scanlon corrected him. "Not as strong as friendship. I'm not groveling, Wally. I'm not asking any favors. After awhile it began to grow interesting, waiting and watching for your next move. There were years when nothing happened, but I knew you were working at it. Then you retired and, for a time, I hoped—until this began to happen. Until you began driving me out of my own home, knowing I couldn't take Minnie with me, knowing I'd have to confess or stand accused."

"I'm glad there's no animosity," Collins said.

"None. You have your perfect case, Wally. You have the motive, you have the time and place, you have my confession and, with a little digging, you'll have the body."

Collins studied the amber fluid in the glass. "Yes, that's mostly true. With your arrest, I'll have left

no loose ends. Every case solved and neatly tucked away. It used to rankle, this one case that was so close to me, and yet remained open. There were times when I thought I couldn't stand leaving it. But who cares, Augie? Who really cares?"

"You do," Scanlon said promptly. "Nothing else counts. You're the perfectionist."

Collins nodded. "This is the end of a chase for me, August. The longest one of my career of constant chases. Now it's over, and already something is missing in my life. I can't wake up and sniff the air and say it's a nice day and maybe something will turn up so I can finally solve that case. Maybe I'll find the clue that has evaded me for more than half my lifetime. Maybe I'll nail that smug, crafty killer who lives next door to me and invariably beats the pants off me at checkers. Of course, before the day was over I'd conclude you were neither smug nor crafty. You were merely lucky."

Scanlon got up and walked across the room to a long table with a wide drawer. He opened it and removed the checker board. "How many times have we played?" he asked, without turning around. "And there wasn't a single day when I brought out that board, I didn't think about doing this."

When he turned, the gun was in his hand. Collins took another drink.

"You were smug, then," he said slowly.

Scanlon walked toward him. "Not smug, scared. I had it all thought out. We were such old, old friends, no one would ever suspect it was murder. Just an accident with a gun."

He tossed the gun onto Collins' lap. "You have a macabre display of weapons in your house. Taken from murderers and near murderers. Add this one, Wally. Label it the gun that almost killed you, five thousand times."

Collins looked at the gun. "It's not loaded."

"I took the bullets out ten years ago, but the idea remained. An empty gun can be reloaded. I was merely fighting temptation."

"In this State it's against the law to keep a gun in the house," Collins said. "I'll spike it, and add it to my collection. Thank you very much."

"Shall I finish my drink or shall we leave now?"

"Finish your drink, man. After thirty-seven years, what's the hurry?"

"After thirty-seven years, the hurry is vital," Scanlon said. "I want to get out of this house! I want to get away from *her*! You have your case. It's the kind of case you always set up. Absolutely perfect! Not a flaw in it."

"I don't know, Augie. I really don't know."

"You've never granted yourself

the luxury of pity in your life and I'm the kind of man who'd hate being a recipient of it. I don't want your hatred, but not your self-righteousness either. I'm a murderer. You caught me—in a snide sort of way—but a thorough one. I played the game for all it was worth and I lost. Take me in, Augie. You'll never rest until you do."

Collins stood up, finished his drink. "No," he said, "I never will rest, so long as that open case stays on the books. But what if I close it? What then? I'm alone, Augie. My house is as empty as yours. I can't go away either, even though my kids want me. I have to stay here because my job isn't finished. You're still free. A murder has never been solved."

"But it is solved," Scanlon said. "This is your day, Wally. You're free now."

"Free? Of what? For what? So long as I could wake each day and be confronted with this problem, I was alive. I had a reason for living. If I close the case, it's over. One thing you don't understand, Augie. You can't because you've been the hunted, not the hunter. The thrill is not in the capture, but in the chase. Capture is an end to it all."

"But it has ended," Scanlon said. "I stopped running, moments ago."

"True, but something's lacking," Collins said. "I created a reputation for perfection. I can't lose that now. Oh, I can get on the witness

stand and say I dug up your wife's body. I can relate your confession, I can give the time, the place, the motive. But I can't provide the weapon, August. I don't know what you killed her with."

He stepped up to Scanlon very fast and clapped a hand over his mouth, held him tightly.

"Don't tell me. That'd spoil everything. I have to find out for myself. And I will! My mind is already working at it. I'll apply the pressure. It'll come when you least expect it, and then I'll have the weapon. That is secondary only to the *corpus delicti*. Without it, my work isn't complete. I want to put my hands on the club, or the knife, or the gun, or the poison glass, and say 'this is the means by which a woman died'.

"If I can't say that, I can't go into court and spoil my otherwise perfect record. A conviction won't be enough. It has to be a conviction based upon absolute fact."

"You'll never find out from me," Scanlon said, when he could speak again.

"I told you I'm working at it. I drove you into one admission. I'll drive you into another. You can't

stay in this house. It's been declared unsafe for habitation, but it doesn't necessarily follow that it can be legally torn down if you don't live in it. The empty house is not a threat to anyone."

"You want me to live with you?" Scanlon asked suspiciously. "You've got a reason for it."

"Maybe," Collins said, "you talk in your sleep. Maybe you'll find yourself driven by desperation to use the same weapon again. There are ways to force your hand, and I'll do it. Oh no, my old friend, the chase isn't over, but while it goes on, I don't see why we can't declare a truce now and then, for a drink, or a game of checkers, or just a quiet evening."

"The weapon," Scanlon said, "is near at hand. It always will be. You'll never find it. I dare you to find it!"

"We each have a wheelbarrow," Collins said. "We'll truck your stuff over to my place. And I'll call off the dogs at City Hall."

"An eventful day," Scanlon said, "calls for a celebration in defiance of medical orders. This is very fine whiskey. I'll drink to the man who —almost— caught me."



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